The Game Plan

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The Game Plan

by FestiveFerret, pouringinsheets

Summary

Shane Hollander is the number two overall NHL draft pick and a newly minted Montreal Voyageur. He's also laser focused on his goals: being the best by beating the best. For him, this means a continued rivalry with number one draft pick—and new Ottawa Centaur—Ilya Rozanov. But when a problem with Rozanov's immigration paperwork threatens his future in the NHL, what does that mean for Shane's own career? He can't risk finding out…so they get married. Just for immigration. A fast, practical, mutually beneficial solution.

No one will ever suspect, let alone find out, that the NHL's greatest rivals are secretly married. And there's certainly no risk of feelings getting involved. They have a game plan.

Notes

What if: Shane and Ilya secretly got married just before the start of their rookie season?

If you're new to this series, welcome! This is a canon couple from book 2 and this fic pulls elements mostly from that book but some others as well. If you're not new to this series...

Major divergences from canon—other than the secret/fake marriage—include:
- Ilya is drafted by the Centaurs
- Scott comes out several years earlier
- Troy does one year in AHL after Juniors and then goes directly to the Centaurs
- The NHL is less homophobic but the Montreal Voyageurs are worse
- Yuna grew up loving the Cens

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: The Arrangement

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[image]

December 2009 - Niagara Falls, NY

Shane rested his face against the steering wheel and waited for Ilya Rozanov to come back to the car. The faux leather was cool against his cheek, which felt flushed even though he hadn't been drinking. Probably stress. He hoped Rozanov was sober enough to be talking to the border agents, though he'd only seen him have one beer at the party before switching to coke. He'd spent most of the time in the corner looking haunted and increasingly frustrated as he tried to get people on the phone. Get someone to help him.

It had been disconcerting to see his face, usually smirking and confident, creased with worry. Shane had always thought he looked so much older than their young age; tonight he'd looked like he needed a blanket and a hug. Unexpectedly ending up in another country when you weren't supposed to leave the one you were in had a way of doing that to a guy. Even a guy like Rozanov.

Shane craned his neck towards the squat, concrete Customs and Border Patrol building. There had been a couple of other cars pulled over into the secondary inspection area when they'd arrived, but Shane's rental was now the only one remaining among the concrete pillars and yellow fluorescent lights. 1am in Queenston, Ontario was like that.

Should Shane have gone in with Rozanov? Vouch for him, somehow, if one eighteen-year-old could vouch for another? His English was better every time Shane saw him, but maybe Shane could explain that this had all been a horrible accident? That everyone had gotten caught up in the moment after Canada had won the World Juniors Championships and that some guy had a friend with a cottage in Niagara Falls on the US side and one thing had led to another, and if anyone – including the dumbass US border agent who'd let two packed cars of rowdy Junior hockey players into the country – had

been paying the slightest bit of attention Rozanov would, at minimum, have been clearly informed he was leaving Canada? And ideally *not have been with them at all?*

Actually Shane kind of hoped Rozanov had thought of a different story. That all sounded…pretty dumb.

Rozanov's face appeared in the window of the office for a moment and then he pushed through the door and trudged over to the car. His shirt was rumpled and even his curls seemed to droop. Whatever story he'd told, it didn't look like CBP had been into it.

Rozanov slid into the passenger seat and sighed. Shane kind of didn't know what to say, so he just waited. Rozanov made a decisive sound. "They will not let me in. There are many hotels in tourist area. If you take me there you can go back to your friends."

Shane thought about the packed party cottage and shuddered. This was what came from trying to be *fun* and *cool.* He'd honestly just been planning to drive back to Toronto.

"They're not my friends," Shane said, feeling like it was important to try to differentiate himself from all of these terrible decisions, the way he had when he'd offered to drive Rozanov to the border halfway through the party, so he could try to figure out his situation. "I was probably just going to drive back to Toronto."

"I don't fucking care, Hollander," Rozanov said, though it lacked all of his usual conviction. Doubly concerning. "Do what you want."

"I want to help," Shane insisted, turning the car on and starting to maneuver out of the parking lot and towards the bright lane markers that would return them through the border into the US. He watched the agents confer about their situation, did the passport shuffle, and pulled through into the sleepy night lights of Lewiston and Niagara Falls. In the main tourist area, he pulled up at a hotel that looked big enough to have a gym and maybe a good breakfast spread.

When he parked and got out, Rozanov looked at him with surprise and suspicion. Shane felt a little offended. It was one thing to be rivals on the ice, but he really didn't think that he'd done anything in the past year that would merit Rozanov thinking he was, like, actually a bad person. He didn't think Rozanov was, he realized. A dick, yeah, but not a bad person. He even showed signs sometimes of being an okay person. The kind that at least deserved whatever chance playing hockey in Canada was going to give him.

“What are you doing?” Rozanov snapped.

“You said do what I want. I want to do the right thing.”

Rozanov rolled his eyes. “You are so boring.” He was interrupted for a minute while they checked in, but seemed to settle into his theme as they walked to their adjacent rooms. “You do not need to worry about my fucking work permit. It will not matter, because you will bore me to death.”

“That’s not what you said on the ice,” Shane quipped.

“Well, you are interesting on the ice,” Rozanov murmured. His voice was low and had an undercurrent of…something. It echoed through Shane in a way that felt much too *interesting* for this whole situation. He shook his head and closed his hotel room door behind him.

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Shane didn’t even try to go to bed, choosing instead to map every square foot of his suite with his footsteps. It was kind of a sexy room. There was a big spa tub and a long strip of gas fireplace along one wall. He wondered if Rozanov’s room looked the same, and then wondered how Rozanov looked in it. He’d thought that before, six months ago, after an encounter with Rozanov in the hotel gym, post-draft had Shane spilling into his fist later to shameful thoughts of his fellow rookie. But that had just been… Anyway, it hadn’t had anything to do with Rozanov specifically, it was just the kind of awakening that a young man who strongly suspected he wasn't straight had at some point about another attractive man who never seemed to mind being looked at.

What was Rozanov doing right now? Pacing too, probably, but with worry, not…inappropriate thoughts. He’d looked like someone whose life had flashed before his eyes. Shane couldn’t help but feel like this wasn’t as big a deal as all that, but then again he’d never had to deal with things like borders and immigration status. What did he know? Maybe Rozanov was in serious trouble, the kind that could affect his NHL contract.

He found himself standing closer to the fireplace like there’d been a sudden chill. That was why he was so upset about this, he decided. Nothing to do with attraction or Rozanov as a person, but everything to do with him as a player. Their careers were supposed to be intertwined. In the beginning, it had rankled him, but he’d come to accept the benefits of it. A good rivalry could make a career. Could

make two careers. What would happen to his own if Rozanov's was in jeopardy?

There was something more he needed to understand here, and even though it was after 2am now, he had a feeling he knew where Rozanov would be.

Shane pushed open the door of the hotel gym to find Rozanov draped over the console of a treadmill, chest heaving, sweat soaking his back. His back was to Shane but every inch of him exuded defeat.

"Are you okay?" The words were out of Shane's mouth before he could swallow them back.

Rozanov spun around, clearly startled, and his expression cycled rapidly through emotions like a slot machine before settling on a distant, disinterested smirk. But his eyes were tinged pink.

"Hollander." He cleared his throat.

"You played well, today," Shane said, unable to fully squash the urge to comfort a clearly distraught Rozanov. He'd given the strong impression he didn't want to talk about the immigration stuff, so Shane tried to steer things back to the only topic they could always both stay on indefinitely: hockey.

Rozanov said, "I know," the smirk returning. "Better than you."

Shane snorted. "That's not what my medal says."

Rozanov's eyes dropped to the floor and he let out a tight breath. "Well, enjoy, because it will be probably your last chance to play me." He shrugged.

Shane frowned. "What do you mean? We're going to play each other all the time next season. This is just a shitty mistake. In the morning you'll be able to get a hold of someone who can send your work permit and we'll drive back to Toronto."

Rozanov shook his head. He walked past Shane to slide down the wall like they had six months ago, legs extended. Shane mirrored his position on the other side. "I don't have one."

"What? But you've been playing in Canada."

Rozanov's eyes flicked up into the corner of the ceiling, looking

uncharacteristically vulnerable. "Has been temporary. I am getting a special permit, for athletes. There was paperwork. I am still waiting for it. That was why I have to stay."

"Okay, well this is the NHL, I'm sure they can—"

"Is…" Rozanov waved his hand, trying to snatch a lost word out of the air. "Violation. I have to start again."

Shane frowned. "Well, it sucks to be stuck here, but I'm sure in a couple of days…"

"You are not understanding. Is months, Hollander. Maybe I am too complicated and Ottawa chooses not to sign me after all. Maybe I go from here back to Russia and they don't let me back in." He rolled his ankle, expression carefully blank, but the long fingers wrapped around his water bottle were white-knuckled and shaking. "I broke the rules."

Shane searched for anything to say, but he was at a loss for words. The thought of Rozanov not being able to play was…impossible.

“Is a shame,” Rozanov continued with a humorless laugh. “Last time I play you was last night and I did not win. I would have beat you next time.”

Next time. Which they maybe wouldn’t have? Shane couldn't believe it. Not a player like Roznaov. The league would move heaven and earth for him. "Come on, Rozanov, there's no way they're going to, what? Send the first draft pick and 2008 Junior Champion back to Russia? It wouldn’t exactly look good for the NHL."

But Rozanov said nothing. Shane was kind of starting to panic. “This is so stupid,” he fumed, pulling his knees to his chest. “Fuck, my friend Monica married an Australian, and all he had to do to get a work permit was show his marriage certificate at the border.”

It was Rozanov’s turn to be quiet, and when Shane dared to look over, he found him looking back intently. Very intently. He could almost see the thought forming in Rozanov’s eyes.

“No. Oh no, I know that look. No, Rozanov.”

“Shane Hollander.” Rozanov’s voice rolled across the words in a considering way that left goosebumps behind on Shane’s skin. “You are not stupid.”

Shane rolled his eyes. “Wow, even when you want something you’re a real charmer.”

“Okay at hockey,” Rozanov continued. “Pretty to look at.” Shane couldn’t help but flush at that. “Responsible. Good husband.” Shane didn’t know what the criteria for that were, but he hoped his heart wasn’t hammering so loudly that Rozanov could hear it. What was even happening right now?

“Very boring, though,” Rozanov added, just in time.

“Shut up,” Shane huffed, and Rozanov did, but only to hoist himself up from the floor with a graceful flex Shane was absolutely ignoring and then drop to one knee, looking infuriatingly smug.

“Shane Hollander, you are the least interesting man on earth but still useful, I think. You should marry me so I can keep beating you at hockey.”

“You wish,” Shane scoffed, though his heart was pounding. Fake though it was, this was technically his first proposal, so he thought he could be forgiven for that.

“Yes.”

“This is the dumbest thing you’ve ever said, and that’s saying something.”

“The more I think, the more is good idea.”

Shane pushed himself up to standing, hoping Ilya would follow, but he remained relentlessly on one knee. Shane turned his back on him and ran his hands through his hair. He couldn’t believe he wasn’t just storming out, but the thing was…

“If we got caught, we’d be in so much trouble,” he whispered to the treadmill.

“Then we won’t get caught,” Rozanov said, like it was that easy. Shane didn’t dare look at him.

“I’m not talking the small kind of trouble,” Shane said. “I’m talking, like, you would get deported. Would either of us be able to keep playing?”

“We will get it canceled soon,” Rozanov said. “I just need to get across

the border now. Who will know? Why would they think we even talk?" And he had a point there. "Think about it." Shane could hear Rozanov get to his feet and leave to go back to his room. Because he knew Shane *was* thinking about it.

Shane knew he should go back to his room too, that it was quickly turning over from late night to early morning and that he would regret every hour of missed sleep tomorrow. The hockey players they'd left behind partying at the cottage would probably be up even later, like he would have been if they'd stayed, but with the evening taking such a turn for the serious…he still couldn't settle. He got on a stationary bike and turned up the resistance, letting the burn settle into his legs and hopefully give the flood of adrenaline pulsing through his body somewhere to go.

Was it serious? Was he seriously considering Rozanov's insane idea? They hated each other, but that didn't mean he wanted Rozanov *gone* or anything. It was the same reason he'd helped him out tonight. Being a rival didn't mean being a dick. But it also meant not sticking his neck out farther than made any sense. If they…got married– *what was he doing even thinking about this?* –and anyone found out, it would be career-ending. There was no one out in the NHL, and a rookie was certainly not the one to blaze the trail. Not to mention he was pretty sure immigration fraud was a big *'no.'* Shane didn't even know if Rozanov was interested in men, though he strongly suspected. Fuck, he didn't even know if *he* was.

Well. Okay, he did. He was. Men like Ilya Rozanov, who he couldn't help but notice because he had eyes. Purely aesthetically speaking, being married to a man like that wouldn't exactly be a hardship. Not that that even mattered, because it would be fake, and they'd get it annulled as soon as Rozanov was back across the border and could get his paperwork sorted out.

And in the meantime, both of their careers would go as planned, and Shane would continue to get to play hockey against the best. Because that was what this was all about, right? What did proving himself even mean if he wasn't beating the best? He turned up the resistance higher on the bike. It was all still crazy. But maybe it was just crazy enough to work.

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Shane hesitated with his hand raised to knock on Rozanov's hotel room door. Just because he had barely slept didn't mean Rozanov was

in the same boat, and regardless, Rozanov didn't really give off a morning-person vibe. Shane ducked back into his room, scrawled a quick *'I'm at breakfast downstairs'* on the hotel notepad, shoved the note under Rozanov's door, and hightailed it to the breakfast bar with his laptop.

Rozanov was annoying even in his absence. After the third time someone had come into the dining room and Shane found himself looking up hopefully, he actively restrained himself from doing so again. He wasn't going to be caught waiting for Ilya fucking Rozanov like an eager puppy. When the hotel staff began clearing the continental breakfast away, though, he took pity. It wasn't Rozanov's fault they'd been up so late the night before. Shane grabbed some extra cups of coffee and, after consulting his memory for the few times he'd interacted with Rozanov in a context involving food, all of the most unhealthy things he could identify.

Rozanov came in just as Shane was cramming a couple of danishes on the slide of the plate next to a cream cheese-laden bagel. Rozanov had clearly just showered, and his damp curls fell to his shoulders, leaving little drops of water on his CCM-branded track jacket. Shane absently wondered if he'd gotten a sponsorship deal with them as well. Yet another thing that put them in the spotlight as a pair. Rozanov did look tired, but he also somehow looked like he'd just come off the set of a swimsuit commercial. Shane was sure he looked like a kid who'd just woken up from a nap. It was depressingly unfair, considering they were both about to start their rookie seasons. Rozanov only had eyes for breakfast, though. When he spotted the coffee, he let out a grateful and slightly indecent sound that made Shane blush in spite of himself.

He cleared his throat. "I saved you breakfast. I've noticed you eat like you're aiming for an early grave."

"Already trying to get my life insurance, Hollander?" Rozanov said, smirking at his carb-covered plate. It was both kind of gross and wholly mesmerizing to watch him demolish his breakfast. When Shane didn't say anything, Rozanov looked up. There was some cream cheese on his lip. Shane wanted to lick it off.

Well, he thought a little hysterically, *if nothing else came of this, at least it continued to clarify his understanding of his sexuality.*

"We do not have to," Rozanov said abruptly, a rare misinterpretation of Shane's silence. "I have thought and I think it is good idea, but I will try other ways." He was usually uncomfortably good at reading

people, Shane had noticed, and the slip-up made Shane wonder if Rozanov was more nervous about this than his ego would allow him to let on. Well, Shane had lost most of a night of sleep to this crazy idea, so he wasn't going to be the one to back down now.

“No,” Shane corrected. “I”– *want to* was on the tip of his tongue but whatever their dynamic was, it wasn’t that–“think it’s a good idea, too,” he settled on. He reached gratefully for his laptop and the comfort of clear steps to execute a plan. “I’ve been doing some research. We don’t need to do much. We can apply online right now for a license and get that taken care of at the Clerk’s Office today. We’re lucky it’s a weekday. And then we just have to wait twenty-four hours and we can get married at City Hall. People do it all the time.” For all sorts of reasons, including citizenship and massively lucrative hockey rivalries. Completely normal.

“What will we do for twenty-four hours?” The question could have been innocent, but Rozanov delivered it in a suggestive purr that made Shane blush to the roots of his hair. He had a sudden vision of Rozanov taking him upstairs and slowly peeling off that track jacket and–Shane choked on his coffee. Rozanov continued, ignoring him now that he’d gotten the reaction he wanted. “I have only been to US once before.”

Shane gaped at him. “You’re kidding. Wow, I’m sorry we’re here then, this place kind of sucks. I mean,” he hastily amended, when two tourists finishing breakfast at the next table gave him the stink eye, “other than the world-class tourist attractions.”

“We will find things to do,” Rozanov said confidently, his mouthful of pastry fortunately robbing the words of any innuendo. “You fill out forms like a good boy and I will go to concierge.”

Shane didn’t get very far, since he didn’t know anything about Rozanov, but he filled in his own information and then perused the stack of brochures Rozanov returned with while Rozanov hunted and pecked on the keyboard to complete their marriage license. There was a brochure for the falls, of course, but the common theme for the rest seemed to be *things they could kick each other’s asses at.* Ropes course. Axe throwing. Mini golf. The casino next door, the arcade in their hotel. He perked up. Maybe today wouldn’t be so bad. The whole point of this marriage thing was to be able to kick Ilya Rozanov’s ass as often as possible, so he might as well enjoy getting a head start. He queued up a YouTube video on axe-throwing technique.

“You were born in Ottawa?” Rozanov grunted, clearly looking over their license form.

“Yeah. I think me going to Montreal was kind of a blow for my parents. They’re happy about you, though. The Cens need a forward.”

“Of course they are,” Rozanov said absently. “What is Ottawa like?” He asked the question so casually that Shane got the feeling the answer was important. He wondered if Rozanov had even been to visit the city he’d be living in more than once. He wouldn't know where anything was. Shane’s parents could–Shane cut his thoughts off like a record scratch. What the hell was that? They weren’t getting married for real. His parents were never even going to meet Rozanov, in all likelihood.

“I hear is boring,” Rozanov added.

“I like it fine,” Shane said defensively.

Rozanov was smirking now. “That makes sense.”

Shane snorted, and any remaining sympathy he had evaporated. “Shut up.”

“Not a nice way to talk to your fiancé.”

“Eat your life insurance bagel.”

Rozanov laughed until the moment they both looked at their marriage license and hit *‘Submit.’*

Chapter End Notes

Fan casting in the header: Hideo Muraoka as Shane, Can Yaman as Ilya. Originally from here with permission.

Chapter 2: The Wedding

December 2009 - Niagara Falls, NY

Their day on the town gave Shane a lot to think about, but he was trying to pick the things to focus on that were most relevant to the reason they were doing all of this: hockey. How the spray from Niagara Falls had shimmered in Rozanov's curls was not relevant. That Rozanov was a devastating natural talent for everything that involved a ball or stick was very relevant. So was his lack of patience and discipline.

Shane thought he could surpass him with study, or if Rozanov kept bouncing his ball off the back leg of the plaster stegosaurus guarding the third hole on the mini golf course.

"Fuck. That bastard keeps moving on me." He lined up his club with the ball again.

Shane laughed, though he stopped laughing when he got stuck in the same spot on his next swing. "Goddammit. It totally does move."

Rozanov ended up winning the course by two strokes, which lit a fire under Shane's skin, and made him want to demand they start at hole one again and do it over. He could beat Rozanov, here or on the ice, but he was gonna have to work for it. The thought made something warm settle in his chest.

Or maybe that came from how Rozanov looked trying on his third suit which was, again, *not* relevant.

"I should be getting married in Tom Ford," Rozanov huffed, tying a purple silk necktie with startling aggression. Shane had, to Rozanov's disgust, easily selected the first suit he'd tried on, a pale gray number that fit well enough for City Hall. They'd walked by on a dry run today, because Shane didn't want any surprises, and although people hadn't been dressed up to the degree they would be for bigger ceremonies, it had also been clear that he and Rozanov would have stuck out conspicuously in their activewear. But any of the outfits Rozanov had tried on so far would have been fine, unless he just wanted to torment Shane with an endless montage of biceps and button-downs, which was possible.

"Do the Centaurs know you're such a diva?" Shane's fingers itched to

straighten Rozanov's lapel, but that seemed…risky.

"I will win best dressed player in NHL," Rozanov declared, smoothing his big hands down his chest, then flipping up the back of the jacket to assess the way the pants fit his ass. Shane felt like they did surprisingly good things for it considering the nearest shopping center they'd been able to find was an outlet mall.

"That's not an award."

"I will make it an award, and then I will win it."

Another thing that today had clarified for Shane was that if he thought *he* was competitive he had, in fact, met his match in Ilya Rozanov. The final lesson was that what Rozanov deemed worth his time seemed to follow two simple criteria: either it was something he thought he could beat Shane at, or something he thought would annoy him. Case in point:

"I like it," Rozanov declared, when Shane had to admit defeat, swallow his pride, and walk into the Rainforest Cafe for dinner. Why did that have to be the on-site restaurant at their hotel? This day wasn't enough like a fever dream without eating something called Anaconda Pasta surrounded by fake tigers—which weren't even *accurate* —and vines?

"That's because you're a giant child."

"Is because I belong. I am like Tarzan, I think. Strange country, long hair, muscles." He delivered this last word with a wink that made their waitress giggle and Shane wish for death.

Rozanov hit his stride over their menus. "That makes you my Jane," he continued. "Maybe that's how I will put you in my phone. Like girlfriend. Because your name sounds like—"

"Yeah, I get it, Rozanov."

Rozanov just smirked in satisfaction and their conversation turned to the people around them. Shane was barely aware of what he was saying. *Like girlfriend.* Rozanov's words were still rattling around in his head, until he blurted out over their entrees, "So you're not planning to, uh. Come out, then? If you're even…" He turned beet red and shoveled food into his mouth.

He was aware of how taboo this was, and the sidelong admission that

came from asking. How he had ended up willing to trust his rival with his biggest secret he didn't know, but it had probably happened sometime when Rozanov was cackling over his mini golf victory. Or maybe when they'd both decided to marry another man.

"I think no," Rozanov said carefully, abruptly sober. "Would be hard, to be the first." It wasn't phrased like a question, but it still hung in the air like one, or like a dangling slapshot about to hammer into the net. Shane took a deep breath.

"Me neither," he said. "At least, not at first. I sometimes think, maybe with my team…once I know them." He didn't know the Voyageurs well yet, but a couple of the guys were friends of his from Juniors and it seemed like a solid team. Not warm, maybe, but professional. The kind of organization that would keep its focus on the game and not be phased by…revelations. He supposed he'd find out, or find out if he wanted to find out.

Rozanov made a noncommittal sound. "Will be nice," he finally said, "to know someone." And when he looked up at Shane with those beautiful hazel eyes, Shane couldn't help but feel like, for just a moment, his *someone*— real or not—understood him perfectly.

"Do you…I mean there have to be other…queer…players, right?" Shane tripped over the word, not just because it was the first time he'd said it out loud but because he didn't know more than that, for himself or for Rozanov.

"Of course," Rozanov nodded, then leaned forward conspiratorially. His voice dropped to a whisper. "I think Eric Bennett."

Shane stared at him. *"Benny?* Hasn't he been married to a woman for, like, decades?"

"I know, he is so old," Rozanov said, responding to the second part. "But being with a woman means nothing about liking men. I have been with many women. Dozens of women. Hundreds of—"

"Don't let the waitress hear you, she'll get jealous."

"Maybe she will want threesome with my pretty husband," Rozanov teased, as if describing Shane as pretty wouldn't unmoor him completely. He'd done that last night, too. One time was a fluke, but twice was…Shane laughed it off, heart racing. He had a wild urge to throw a roll at Rozanov in defense, but he had seen a four year old do that a few minutes ago and that wasn't a parallel he was eager to

draw.

“I’m not going to compete with you for women,” he said, leaving out that he wasn’t sure if he even liked women that much at all.

“Because you know you cannot win.”

“I—” whatever feeble comeback Shane might have summoned was interrupted by a FaceTime request from his phone on the table. He’d hoped that he’d successfully fended his parents’ concerns off when he’d called them earlier, but when he looked down it wasn’t their contact photo on his screen but his agent, Farah’s. He waffled for a minute. On the one hand, it wasn’t a great time. On the other, she only called when it was important.

He reached for his phone and gestured to Rozanov to be quiet, already knowing from the look on his face that he wasn’t in a mood to be helpful.

“Hi Farah,” Shane said, trying to position the camera to get as little background as possible. “What’s up?”

“Sorry to interrupt your celebration,” she said, “but I need you to sign one more supplementary file for your contract.” She looked as put-together as always, even though it was late evening and she was clearly in her home office. It was more professional than Shane’s backdrop of fake vines. Maybe she would think it was digital. “So I’ll just fax it to…are those parrots?”

“Um, virtual background,” Shane said, though an ill-timed sound effect of monkey calls and waterfalls did him no favors. Rozanov snorted, and to add insult to injury, their waitress chose that moment to appear.

“Can I interest you gentlemen in dessert?” she asked. Rozanov summoned her over to whisper his answer in her ear which was a turn of events that clearly delighted her and made Shane’s stomach flip with something he couldn’t look too closely at.

“Shane?”

He didn’t want to know how many times Farah had tried to get his attention.

“Where the *hell* are you? Wait, am I interrupting a date? I’m so sorry.”

Rozanov looked dangerously gleeful at that, and Shane impulsively reached across the table and clapped a hand across his mouth, trying to ignore the feeling of stubble and lips and…mistake. Rozanov licked his hand immediately, which was gross, and also now Shane and his cock both knew what that felt like.

“Um, I’m just…everything’s fine,” he deflected, flipping Rozanov off and then wiping his hand on his pants while Rozanov shook with silent laughter. “But you’ll need to fax it to my hotel in Niagara Falls.” This last he said in a mumbled rush, half-hoping that would be enough. It wasn’t.

“It sounded like you said you’re in Niagara Falls.”

“Yes. The, uh, Sheraton on the US side.”

“Niagara Falls has more tropical wildlife than I remember.”

“It’s the hotel restaurant. Anyway, just send it over and I’ll send it back, thanks Farah, you’re the best!”

She gave him a *‘this isn’t over’* look that would probably haunt his dreams, but just asked him to text her the info and they’d take care of it.

“Since this is a date,” Rozanov said as he hung up, “I ordered only one dessert. I think you will like it.”

As Rozanov laughed at him over an enormous volcano made of brownies and ice cream, Shane was sure of at least one thing: he wanted to spend the rest of his life competing against Ilya Rozanov. Not for women, no, and maybe not for the last word. But for everything fucking else.

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After the chaos of the previous day, their wedding was strangely anticlimactic. The part of City Hall they were in was pretty utilitarian, even if everyone in line had an air of celebration about them, and in the end it was mostly about confirming their paperwork and then checking the basic boxes. It seemed like it should be harder to make a lifelong commitment to someone, but then again, until a few years ago he wouldn't have been able to make a legal commitment to another man at all.

The thought made him wish he'd followed his wild impulse to ask his parents to come serve as witnesses when he'd called them to make excuses for his situation the previous day. This seemed like an occasion to accord a certain degree of respect, even if their reasons were…unusual. But in the end, he'd had no idea how to explain that impulse—or the actual situation—and accepted 'the people next in line' as witnesses. That turned out to be a yuppie-looking couple who showed distressing signs of wanting to know how Shane and Rozanov had met and fallen in love. Rozanov turned their questions back on them with enviable grace while Shane blushed and stammered, which fortunately everyone seemed to think was cute.

He tried not to stammer during the important parts, though his blush persisted. That stupid Niagara Falls Outlet Mall should hire Rozanov to be on their billboards, the way he wore that dark gray bargain suit. He'd tamed his hair back into a bun and shaved, and seeing him without stubble on his jaw somehow reminded Shane of how young they both were to be saying things like:

"I, Shane Yoshida Hollander, take you, Ilya Grigoryevich Rozanov, to be my lawfully wedded husband."

As he promised to be by Rozanov's side for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, he could almost believe the words were true. Not a contract of love, of course, but a contract of care. Of mutual benefit. The contract you made with a new team. This totally made sense.

He repeated that to himself as Rozanov started his vows, his hands warm and rough around Shane's and his expression inscrutable. Rozanov's full name rolled off his tongue elegantly and brought an extra roundness to the words after.

"Will you be exchanging rings?" the officiant said politely, and Shane frowned. Shit. They'd forgotten that part.

"Um." He looked around. It didn't feel right not to have *anything*.

"You could use this?" the kind woman in line behind them said, holding out a blue hair tie she'd tugged off her wrist.

"Are you sure?" Shane asked, but Rozanov was already twisting his own out of his hair, letting his curls tumble down. They cascaded loose, just inches from Shane's face, and he had the sudden, almost overwhelming urge to reach up and bury his fingers in them, to pull until Rozanov gasped and they got lost in each other.

But Rozanov took his hand, which was all for the best, holding it fast when it wanted to twitch up and grab him. Rozanov folded the hair tie in half and rolled it down over Shane's finger, nestling it at the base like it belonged there. It was just a little scrap of elastic, but there was a weightiness to the moment that Shane couldn't deny.

He hastily took Rozanov's hand and repeated the favour, hoping Rozanov couldn't feel his fingers shaking as he tried not to drop the 'ring' and make a fool of himself in front of everyone. He had to push it past the knuckle, and Rozanov curved his fingers, cupping Shane's to make it easier to roll it on.

And then they were just standing there, holding hands, staring at each other. And *fuck* Rozanov was gorgeous, there was no way around it. And he was wearing a ring Shane had put on him, with his hair in a messy halo around his face, somehow managing to make him look even more like someone who got paid to be beautiful all day.

Maybe that was why, when the officiant said they could kiss, Shane… did. Not, like, with tongue or anything, but more than the chaste press Rozanov started with. Enough to feel how soft and warm he was. Enough to feel Rozanov maybe, terrifyingly, start to kiss him back with added heat, before Shane pulled away.

Enough to want more.

Enough to feel his breath catch in his throat when later, back at the hotel, Rozanov leaned on Shane’s room door, strong arms crossed in that stupid-hot suit, and murmured, “Is our wedding night, Hollander.”

It would be so easy to give in to the suggestion, to pull Rozanov through it and push away all the voices that told him that Rozanov just wanted to get laid, that it didn’t have anything to do with Shane. Those voices that were even more terrifying than the ones that had to admit, now, once and for all, that whatever attraction Ilya Rozanov had unlocked in Shane wasn't just because he was a man, but because he was…whatever he was. Hot as fuck. And equal parts infuriating and challenging.

With all the strength in his body, Shane looked Rozanov square in the eyes. “You wish, Rozanov,” he said, before shoving his keycard into the lock and going in alone.

But once he was alone…

Shane leaned back against the door and stared up at the ceiling as if it could give him some answers, but all he found was a croissant-shaped, yellow stain in the paint. He stripped out of his suit, leaving his clothes in a pile on the bed and hopped right in the shower, as if he could wash off the way Rozanov made him feel like something heavy was sitting on his chest.

Instead, the hot water stoked the fire under his skin, and his cock started to throb full, begging for attention. Shane ignored it while he washed his hair, dried off, and climbed into bed. But in the quiet dark, knowing Rozanov was tucked in just on the other side of a thin wall, Shane's hand snaked south.

He gripped his dick and just squeezed for a moment, enjoying the warm pressure of his palm. When he closed his eyes, his helpful imagination provided a replay of the moment in the hallway with Rozanov—his bright, questioning eyes and inviting smirk.

Shane had done his best over the last six months to avoid thinking about Rozanov when he *took care of things,* but his mind always brought him back to the first night in the gym: the heat, the tension, the pure, vibrant desire that had hit him for the first time. It was just because Rozanov, accidentally, had been the moment when he figured out that maybe men were just as exciting, or more so, than women. It was just…bad luck.

But now Rozanov was his husband, and this was their *wedding night.* It would be sort of weird to not think about him at all. Not because he owed that to Rozanov or anything, but just because it was sort of a big thing. Impossible not to think about.

So it'd be stupid to bother trying.

Besides, if Rozanov knew, he'd probably enjoy it anyway. He was so full of himself. Shane squeezed again, stroking his hand up and down his cock, and breathing out a slow sigh. It wasn't just that Rozanov was hot, it was that he probably knew what he was doing. He was confident, anyway, always looked at Shane like he knew exactly what he would do to him, like maybe he'd thought about it before.

Had he?

Shane wanted to know what it was like. He wanted to feel thick, angular muscles under his hands instead of soft curves. He wanted stubble to scrape up the inside of his thighs. He wanted to know what it felt like to have a cock slide into his throat. Maybe slide other

places, too.

His hand moved faster and faster and he spread his legs, folding his knees up and imagining someone settled in between them, pushing them apart, touching him…

He heard the ghost of Rozanov's voice in his ear. *Come for me, Hollander,* and then he was rocketing past the point of no return. He grabbed a tissue from the bedside table and jerked once, twice more and then he was coming, waves of pleasure pulsing through him as he soaked the tissue.

He lay there breathless, old guilt curling through his gut. He and Rozanov weren't *really* married. Well, they were. But they weren't really *husbands.* They were…co-conspirators. It wasn't fair to think about him that way, and it was going to be fucking distracting when they had to regularly play each other once the pre-season started.

Shane got out of bed and pulled on sweatpants and a t-shirt to stop the way his skin was buzzing at the soft sheets brushing against it. Whatever this weird day had been, it was over.

Tomorrow they'd go back to the border, get Rozanov's work permit, and return to their separate lives, no one the wiser.

The thought of never seeing Rozanov except on the ice didn't make Shane as happy as he'd thought it would, and when he pulled his hair tie ring off his finger to tuck it into his wallet, he felt a pang of something like regret.

Chapter 3: The Secret

It wasn't until they bent for their first faceoff of the pre-season that Shane really, truly believed they were going to get away with this. In the eight months since World Juniors—since their marriage—he hadn't seen Rozanov at all. The only reason he'd been sure he'd managed to stay in Canada was the Google alert Shane had on his name, and he saw news that Rozanov had gone to training camp, taken this or that sponsorship deal, been rumored to be involved with one model or another.

All completely normal and not worth texting him over, which Shane had definitely not considered doing almost every time he'd gotten himself off, helpless to have any name on his lips other than Rozanov's.

That was less normal, but right now it was of no consequence, because there Rozanov was, smirking across from Shane on the ice, right where he belonged. Just as they'd planned for. Secretly married and no one the wiser, ready to slam each other into the boards. Shane grinned and Rozanov smirked back in amusement.

"Miss me, Hollander?"

"Missed beating you," he said.

"You are better at hockey than you are at mini golf, yes?" It was Rozanov's turn to grin, but not for long. Shane won the faceoff.

As the pre-season flowed into Shane's rookie season, he won fewer of those than he'd like, and Montreal won fewer games than anyone would like. Montreal was still leading Ottawa overall, and sat first in their division, but there was no denying that the Centaurs were a different team after their infusion of Rozanov charisma.

Unfortunately, Shane could kind of relate. He could mostly justify his deep study of Rozanov's technique as his professional obligation; he did the same for other star centers he faced regularly. But they didn't affect him quite the same way—not even the New York Admirals' Scott Hunter, who'd been Shane's hockey hero even before he'd come out as gay at the end of the previous season.

With Rozanov, it was different. It always had been. When Shane watched footage of him playing, even an old game against another

team, and he did something especially impressive or creative, Shane felt…incensed. There was no other word for it. It made him want to tie on his skates, drag Rozanov out on the ice, and say, *Do that again. I want to figure out how to beat it.*

So his mind hung on to ideas of Rozanov like a dog with a very well-chewed bone, and every time they found themselves in the same building, Shane felt like Rozanov's presence was a phone notification he couldn't swipe away.

Whether Rozanov also seemed to sense he'd gotten under Shane's skin or whether he treated all centers the same wasn't clear, but Shane did know that while he did his level best to avoid Rozanov as much as possible, that didn't go both ways.

"Do I need to beat up whoever gave you that bruise?" Rozanov teased, bumping into Shane while they waited for play to restart. "Or maybe it is a hickey and I need to beat them up for other reason."

Shane shoved him back out of his space, and the home crowd cheered, probably hoping for a fight. "Maybe you could focus on the game instead of obsessing about my neck."

It was a bruise, and it was from neither a game fight nor an amorous bedfellow. It was from one of Shane's resistance bands snapping in his hand and nearly taking his eye out, but Rozanov didn't need to know that.

"But is such a pretty neck," Rozanov purred. "Maybe you want another one on the other side? Hotels here in Montreal are so nice. Big beds."

The ref blew his whistle, and Shane shoved Rozanov again, leaving him chuckling to himself as Shane skated towards the center line.

Sometimes, he worried Rozanov's approach to things would put their plan in jeopardy, but it held fast. He didn't know what Rozanov had told his admin team and agents, but there wasn't the barest whiff of rumor about them on social media, and what? People were going to look at Rozanov laughing while he checked Shane, or batting those obnoxiously long eyelashes at him and think, "Maybe they're secretly married?" Of course not, because it was ridiculous.

The whole thing was ridiculous, but it was also the new shape of his rivalry with Rozanov. It made every win sweeter and every defeat sting harder. Because for whatever fucking set of messed up reasons, Shane no longer just wanted to beat Ilya Rozanov. He wanted to

impress him.

January 2011 - Montreal, QC

“Hollander.” Shane jumped in surprise at the voice behind him in the locker room. He’d stayed behind until the bitter end to take a moment to himself after losing to Ottawa again. The last person he wanted interrupting him right now was Rozanov. Except he also did, because it meant seeing him, and that was even worse.

“Come to gloat?” Shane snapped. He knew it was uncalled for. Gloating was normal for them; snapping at each other was not. He was just burning with frustration right now. The expectations on his shoulders were weightier than he’d anticipated for his rookie season, and the rivalry was something that Montreal’s coaches, players, and fans used as a point of disappointed evaluation as much as they did for support. Shane was playing the best hockey of his life, no question. He just thought it would be more fun. He didn’t blame Rozanov for that, but he also sometimes did.

Rozanov seemed to sense his dark mood and hesitated. But he wouldn’t have sought Shane out for no reason. They didn’t do that, and Shane’s fantasies of Rozanov finding him in the showers and consummating their marriage had, if not faded, become less frequent. Rozanov was here for something serious.

“Is something wrong?” Shane tried to modulate his tone, though when he made the mistake of looking over at Rozanov, his voice cracked on the last word. If Rozanov had been handsome eight months ago, he was stunning now. The low light of the empty locker room highlighted his cheekbones and the crease of a frown between his brows. Shane wanted to go to him and smooth it. Just like that, he was putty. It was embarrassing. He’d probably do anything Rozanov wanted.

“Is too late for annulment,” Rozanov said. “We need a divorce.”

Well. Anything other than that.

“Why? You want to marry someone else already?”

Rozanov shifted uncomfortably. He was standing by the door, far enough away that his expression was as inscrutable as it had been on their wedding day. “No,” he said at last. “But perhaps you do. Is…was our agreement. Paperwork was slow, but is okay now. I will get a

lawyer so we can get a divorce, and I can stay in Canada still. But is too late for annulment. I'm sorry."

And he really sounded it. Like he regretted trapping Shane into something. The news wasn't exactly a huge surprise. Neither of them had actually taken steps to reverse their decision, because that would have required talking.

So it was kind of nice but also dumb that Rozanov was trying to take responsibility for everything. Shane couldn't help but snort, which made Rozanov look at him sharply. "Ilya," Shane said, then stiffened when he realized he'd used Rozanov's first name. Rozanov looked similarly stunned, but Shane plowed forward. It was out there now. And whatever. He was his husband, after all.

"It's fine," Shane continued. "Yeah, I didn't think it through a *lot,* but I did think it through. I didn't do anything I didn't want to do. I looked up divorces too, back then, and we'd have to file a bunch of paperwork through a lawyer and submit it to the court. With our names all over it. At this point I feel like it's easier to keep it up than risk filing and something going public." The idea of staying married to Rozanov was less terrifying than Shane expected it to be. Shane had gotten used to their arrangement, simple as that. It came with a sort of security, in its own weird way: the known of what they'd done, rather than the unknown of what could happen if they tried to undo it. He needed stability right now. Life as a rookie for the Voyageurs was unstable enough.

"You did nothing you didn't *want* to do?"

Shane could hear the smirk in Ilya's voice. He should have known he would pick up on that and ignore the rest. "Yes," Shane said, letting his exasperation show, "because I *want* to have a hockey career that involves beating you."

"Is not going so well for you then."

"Asshole."

Rozanov smirked, and then they were left just looking at each other, breathing in the half-dark. Shane could feel his heartbeat starting to quicken. Rozanov gazed at him intently, as if he could hear it.

"I understand," Rozanov said slowly. "Is nice being married to me. I am a handsome man, and the best at hockey. Maybe you will learn some things."

“You didn’t hear a word I said.”

“You said you do not want a divorce. Works for me. Paperwork is terrible. Risky.” And okay, maybe he had been listening, even if he was being a shit about it. “Maybe I also like being married to you,” Ilya said, voice a low purr. He took a step towards Shane, and Shane took a step forward in turn, as if drawn to his magnetic north. Every fantasy Shane had ever had of Rozanov finding him in the locker room was running like a ticker tape across the bottom of his brain and he wondered wildly what Ilya would do if Shane sank to his knees and asked him to teach him how to suck his cock.

“Okay,” another voice said. “I was waiting for the least awkward time to let you know that I was here, but I can’t tell where things are going so, um. I’m here.”

They both whirled around to see a horrified-looking Hayden Pike, Shane’s linemate and best friend, staring at them. Shane's first instinct was, unhelpfully, to try and come up with a lie that made sense, but nothing did. He glanced at Ilya, who looked equally panicked. Shane’s palms broke out in a cold sweat. This all hinged on no one finding out and now someone knew, and it was all going to fall apart. How could they be so stupid as to discuss this *at the arena?* For fuck’s sake.

But then Shane really looked at Hayden, and realized that his horror was as much embarrassment and confusion as anything else. Hayden was Shane's best friend. Maybe he was someone they might actually be able to trust with this. Once they explained. How much were they going to have to explain? How much had Hayden heard? Was it worse if he’d heard all of it, or just the end?

Rozanov was just resting his forehead against a locker. “How much did you hear?” he grunted.

“Let’s start with *you’re married,”* Hayden said, “and go from there.”

“I–” Rozanov looked to Shane for help. “My team is–”

“Go,” Shane said. “He’s my friend, it’ll be fine. I’ve got this. I’ll…text you.”

Rozanov nodded and left the room, only hesitating at the door for a moment. Shane nodded back, and then he was gone.

Hayden exhaled shakily. “Drinks at my house. *Now.”*

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Shane couldn't pinpoint exactly when he'd started to get unexpectedly emotional, but it was probably around the third drink and the story about the hair tie rings. In retrospect, Hayden probably hadn't needed that detail. Shane could have just told him that he and Rozanov had gotten married and decided to hide it because it would ruin their careers. It was perfectly believable, if still confusing. But it wasn't the truth, and Hayden was trying so, so hard to be a supportive friend, so…he'd told him everything. And then, maybe he'd looked close enough to a breakdown that Hayden had hugged him awkwardly until the mutual embarrassment had gotten to be too much.

"So you're…not married." Hayden was scrubbing a hand across the back of his blush-pink neck.

"No, we definitely are."

"But you don't…want to be?"

"Well, we've decided that we do. I guess."

"But you don't love each other."

"Fuck no." Not love, certainly. *Want,* maybe, but that was beside the point.

"But you guys are gay?"

"Um. Well. I can't speak for Ilya…that's not for me to talk about."

Hayden frowned. "Didn't you take a girl out last week?"

"Well…"

"Oh, you're bisexual!" Hayden looked so proud that he knew the word that Shane almost didn't have the heart to correct him. God, Hayden was a good friend.

"Uh, no, I don't think…I keep…" he struggled into silence and Hayden looked at him with unexpected sharpness.

"Shane. You know it's okay to be gay, right?"

Shane glanced around automatically as if someone would be able to hear them in Hayden's living room. Well, he supposed his wife Jackie might, but she was long asleep, and they were the kind of couple

where information went as a package deal anyway. Although, if he asked Hayden not to tell her, he didn't think he would. That was how big a deal this was. And Hayden, bewildered as he'd been, had hugged him.

"Yeah," he said finally, on a long exhale. "Yeah, of course I do. It would just be…easier if I weren't. But." He squared his shoulders and prepared to tell the truth to God, himself, and Hayden Pike. "I am."

Hayden looked at him steadily for a few more moments before exhaling slowly and leaning back on the couch cushions as if he'd been told he didn't have to cover for their goalie with no pads in a playoff game. "Fair enough, man, fair enough. Wow. Um. Give me a minute." Shane did, while rolling the corner of the blanket Hayden had put in his lap into a little crepe. A minute later, Hayden burst out, "This is some romcom shit, you know that, right? Marrying for immigration but then sticking it out?"

"We're not sticking it out for love, it's for safety. If anyone finds out what we did, we could get into huge trouble. Marrying for immigration is super illegal, and we'd probably both get kicked out of the NHL and Rozanov would have to go back to Russia. If we try to get divorced now, some county clerk would see our names and leak it to the press."

"Uh huh. But like. Ignoring the fact that he's Ilya Rozanov, he's also super hot."

"Hayden!"

"What! I have eyes. Don't tell me you don't think he's hot."

"No, I do." Shane's blush betrayed him.

"Oh fuck, you *really* do. This *is* a romcom!"

"I hate this."

"Shane. Buddy. When you realize you want to bone your husband, I'm here for you. Not like. I don't mean. I don't need details. But…to talk. Whenever you want. About…stuff."

"Thanks Hayden," he conceded, and Hayden nodded in satisfaction. Hayden had vocally considered himself something of an expert on love since he'd met and married Jackie, who was admittedly awesome. Shane couldn't be surprised that he'd latched on to the

more…romantic…parts of the story. But now that someone knew about him, and someone he actually liked and trusted, he couldn't stop the waterfall from spilling out. "I think I was lying to myself for a long time about not being interested in women. I thought it didn't really matter because I had hockey, and I could just ignore this other part of me and maybe it wouldn't be true."

"I'm sorry. That's shitty."

"Or, like, maybe I just needed to find the right one, you know? Like I could tell myself it was just me being picky. But then…I realized that actually there was something I wanted, it just wasn't any of them."

"It was a 6'3", Russian, puck-for-brains asshole, who is weirdly obsessed with you."

"No!" Shane laughed and shoved Hayden in the shoulder, nearly tipping over himself, and okay, those drinks had made themselves known. "No. Just, you know. Guys."

"Do you and Rozanov have a deal where you can, like, date other people? Since you're pretending this isn't a romcom?"

Shane shook his head. "Even if it didn't feel super risky because of Ilya, I still don't think I could. I can barely admit it to you, to myself, I can't imagine just…going to a club and picking someone up."

"Hunter came out. It's not like it's the end of the world to be gay in hockey anymore."

Shane snorted. "Not that I'm not deeply impressed by what Hunter did, but it's not like, oh, one guy came out so it's all okay for everyone now."

"Shit, yeah. I didn't mean it like that. Just that if you did want to, you could."

"Yeah." Shane leaned back and tipped his face up to the ceiling. "Not sure all the Voyageurs would be okay with it."

"Well, they sure as shit wouldn't be okay with you being married to Ilya Rozanov," Hayden said with a chuckle.

Shane knew that was supposed to be funny, because he'd *said* that there were no real feelings between him and Ilya, but it still pulled sharply at a little thread somewhere deep in his chest. It was just the

layers, really. He was allowed to be gay but he wasn't allowed to date someone they didn't approve of. As if no player had ever dated anyone controversial or had family on another team; everyone always seemed to get over that. The rules were different for Shane because just asking to be gay was already asking for a lot of grace, apparently, so beyond that, he'd better not push it.

But it felt nice to tell someone, even if it didn't really solve anything. He couldn't help but feel like he'd actually gotten lucky tonight, with Hayden walking in on them, and not just because of who had found them. The only other teammate he thought for sure would at least be cool with his sexuality—if not his choice of husband—was J.J. But even J.J. hated Ilya with the heat of a thousand arena lights, which was a pretty typical opinion for anyone who didn't play for the Ottawa Centaurs.

Not that any of it mattered. On the ice, in the locker room, in public, he and Ilya were vicious rivals who hated each other and only wanted to win. That story was part of why they'd been the top two draft picks, and dismantling that wasn't a boat he wanted to rock; the waters were cold and deep and choppy, and he just wanted to keep his head down, play hockey, and get out of the season still dry.

October 2011 - Montreal, QC

Rozanov slammed Shane into the boards, and Shane had the somewhat depressing thought that it was the most action he'd gotten in a while. He bit down whatever he might say about it. He didn't need to be talking to Rozanov to know that he'd probably been getting laid as much as he wanted over the past year, although now that they'd agreed to stay married he'd been discreet enough about it that the gossip rags were starting to speculate about why someone who'd been a notorious playboy *hadn't* been linked to any new ingenues recently. They'd have a field day with the truth.

Which was why it was a problem when Ilya did things like lean in close and murmur, "Still so helpless," like he didn't just have six inches and thirty pounds on him, and like it didn't instantly kick off a mental montage of Ilya holding Shane down and–

"Fuck off, Rozanov," Shane snarled, and Ilya relinquished his hold when Troy Barrett, Ottawa's new left winger, skated by and looked at them curiously just before Shane's line was called off the ice.

Shane couldn't get a read on Barrett. He was serious and deadly, just up from the AHL, and already making the Centaurs even more formidable. Shane had studied his play style a little, and he seemed to be developing a hell of a mouth on him – probably due to Ilya's bad influence. Shane squirmed a little at the thought of them spending enough time together for Barrett to get Ilya's habits. Barrett was… distressingly hot. Maybe that was why the press around Ilya's conquests had been so quiet. Maybe it had less to do with his relationship, such as it was, with Shane and more with another man. Maybe—

His line was back on, and Rozanov was in his face within seconds. There was no one nearby this time to hear what Rozanov said, so he took off his filters.

"I should score a goal for my husband, you think he would like that?"

Shane skated around him and saved his retort for the next pass.

"You can't get him flowers or something?"

"No. He wants a goal. I can tell."

"Shows what you know." Before Shane skated off, Ilya gave him a sultry look like he knew everything Shane thought about late at night. Shane scored the next goal, because fuck him. And it sure wasn't a goal for Rozanov.

Shane knew where the reference came from. When Scott Hunter had come out very publicly, kissed his boyfriend on the Jumbotron and everything, he'd said he scored his goals for him. It had turned the hockey world upside-down for many and filled it with potential for others. For people like Shane. He'd written Hunter a nonspecific note of thanks after, and wondered if Ilya had maybe done something similar. They'd written to each other, if single word text messages counted as correspondence. It was the only contact they'd had since Shane's brief series of messages explaining what had happened with Hayden.

Wow, Shane had written to Ilya—'Emergency 2' in his phone contacts—as he'd watched Hunter swallow another man's tongue on live TV.

Yeah, he got back. And that was it. Shane had updated his contact info then, though. Emergency 2 seemed so…and 'Roz' was too… anyway he'd settled on Rose. His secret girlfriend. His secret husband.

Who did, in fact, score a goal tonight and wink at Shane afterwards. Shane answered with another of his own. *This* was what conversation was meant to be for them: answering shots.

December 2011 - Ottawa, ON

"How many?" someone was saying when Shane came into the locker room for practice.

"Gotta be at least five dozen," one of his teammates added, then, "Damn, Hollander, what did you do?"

What he'd done was taunt the one person more competitive than he was, Shane thought as he looked at the massive heap of red roses spilling from his temporary stall in the visiting team dressing room. In the very back he could see a tiny card. He hoped his teammates had given him the privacy of not reading it, though he knew Ilya would have been discreet. Shane's cheeks were flaming as he stepped towards his stall, past his whooping teammates. It was kind of a big deal, even if it was so much bigger than they knew. Shane hadn't openly had a date in, well, about as long as Rozanov had been out of the press. The thought ran through him uncomfortably. If anyone was looking…but why would they?

And sure enough, the little card that read *"Ready to win"* was from "Lily." Shane couldn't help the dumb smile on this face. What a fucking asshole. His fucking asshole, he realized, for almost exactly two years. And maybe it was his teammates thinking this was something it wasn't, or maybe it was realizing that was kind of a long time since their wedding, or that he'd been out to Hayden and J.J. for nearly a year now, but when the next teammate shouted, "Come on, Hollander, who are they from?" he answered:

"A guy I've been seeing."

That was one way to silence a locker room. There were some uncomfortable laughs like they thought it might be a joke, but Shane wasn't really one to joke. He didn't pull pranks. He just put his head down and played the best damn hockey in the NHL. And right now, with the words out of his mouth, he hoped that would be enough.

"He must think you're doing something right," J.J. said, breaking the silence and giving Shane a hearty clap on the back. He squeezed his shoulder reassuringly before pulling away, and Shane looked at him

gratefully.

“Damn,” Hayden added. “He’s showing me up. I think the most I’ve ever gotten for Jackie was two dozen.”

“Did the Voyageurs stop paying you?” J.J. teased, always the one to try to figure out how to fill an awkward pause.

Archer cleared his throat and bluntly, but not meanly, asked, “So are you, like…gay? Like Scott Hunter?”

Shane squared his shoulders and finally turned to look at his teammates. There were a few faces that looked uncomfortable, and many that looked confused or surprised, but whatever he’d been most afraid of finding there—anger, disgust, shame—seemed absent. He was gonna have to write Scott Hunter more than just a nonspecific note, he thought. “Yeah,” he said. “I’m gay.”

“Cool,” Hayden said. “Thanks for telling us, man.” He made it sound casual, but Shane could see the pride in his eyes, and the nervousness. After telling Shane he thought the team might be cool about it, Shane knew he was hoping he wasn’t wrong. So was Shane. But it was time. Even if they were wrong about the team, this felt right. He didn't want to hide this anymore; there was still so much more he needed to hide.

He sent a photo of the flowers to Ilya after practice and, on impulse, changed his contact name to ‘Lily’ to match the card.

Happy anniversary to you too, Shane wrote.

Too much?

Shane hadn’t known what he’d expected, since they didn’t really text, but he was oddly touched that Ilya wrote back right away even though it was probably just luck he was looking at his phone.

Got my friends talking, Shane said. ***I told them. Not about us, but about. Me.***

How is it going?

Good I think? He knew it wasn’t over, and he might have to deal with management somehow, but he couldn’t help but feel like he was going to weather this storm. Practice had felt basically normal. ***A little weird of course but. Things are different now.*** He thought about the texts he’d find if he scrolled up a bit, the two short words that had marked

the occasion of the first man coming out in the NHL.

I'm glad, Ilya said, then, ***I did not get anything from you for anniversary.***

Shane snorted. Trust Ilya to bring this back to him. ***Sorry, I didn't know we were at the gift stage.*** He hoped the sarcasm came through.

No problem. You can send me photo.

Shane shivered, and his cock twitched. Fuck, they couldn't do this. They were playing each other tonight. Shane was literally in the visiting dressing room. ***What kind?***

You know what kind.

In your dreams.

Yes.

Before he could reply, another text came in. And another. But not from Ilya.

Farah. His parents. His phone started to ring. For one wild second, he thought they were all somehow wishing him a happy anniversary. He heard a shocked sound that made him look up from his phone only to see Hayden looking down at his own in horror. "Shane," he whispered.

"What?" Shane was starting to panic. *Was someone hurt?*

"There's a video."

Shane looked at Hayden's screen as the locker room around him filled with whispers. His blood ran cold when he saw the screengrab of him and Ilya kissing on their wedding day posted on Twitter for the whole world to see.

Everyone was calling for his anniversary after all.

Chapter 4: The Fallout

It was hard to blame the couple who had stood behind them at City Hall, witnessed for them, offered a hair tie for Ilya's ring, because Shane and Ilya had never asked them to keep it quiet. They'd posed a few subtle questions to them about which sports they watched, and hockey hadn't been one of them at the time. But of course there was a difference between recognizing two nineteen-year-old draft picks just out of Juniors and looking at old wedding videos and realizing the two guys who got married right before you were Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov, featured on Shreddies boxes all over North America.

Shane hadn't known they were filming, though. If he had, he would have asked them to delete it. At the time, they were probably just excited. Now, it was a million dollar payout, if they'd played it right.

As it was, there was no denying it was them in the video. While it didn't show the part with their vows, with their names, there wasn't really plausible deniability considering they both had somewhat of a unique look. Ilya especially. And the accent. And Shane was as red as a tomato, which he hadn't known at the time and was really wishing he hadn't just found out.

He watched the video four times, heart crawling up his throat with sharpened claws. "Ah," he said, when it was done. Hayden stared at him. "I have to—" Shane pulled his phone out and turned away. He didn't trust his voice so he just texted Ilya: ***We need to talk.*** The video release had probably been timed on purpose to come out when he and Ilya were both in Ottawa, playing against each other, but at least that meant Shane could get a hold of him easily. At least they could talk before they were ambushed by reporters.

I saw it, came Ilya's reply, only a heartbeat later. ***Meet me in the hall.***

We need somewhere private to talk.

I know.

Shane changed as quickly as he could, the rest of the team still whispering around him. He ignored them all, shook his head when Hayden and J.J. tried to ask him about it, and then went to find Ilya.

Ilya was leaning back against the wall just outside the visitor's locker room, eyes tight and focused on the floor. He was scowling.

"Rozanov."

Ilya snapped his gaze up to Shane's and he nodded then tipped his head down the hall. He started walking, and Shane followed him, up a set of stairs and into the supporting staff offices. Ilya opened a door that said *Harris Drover* on it and ushered him in. "We can talk here."

They just stood there, staring at each other.

"I don't know what to do," Shane finally confessed.

Ilya shrugged, and Shane knew him well enough now to know it was anything but a casual gesture. "You tell the truth and I have to go back to Russia."

"No!" Shane snapped, harsher than he meant. "I mean, we committed fraud," he hissed. "It's not that simple."

Ilya's eyes locked with his, bright and sharp, intent. "Then what do we do? You cannot lie and say this was real all along."

"Why not?" Shane crossed his arms affronted.

Ilya smirked. "You are terrible liar, Hollander."

"Fuck you. I've managed this long."

But Ilya’s smirk was quickly giving way to a look of defeat. It reminded Shane so much of the night that had started this all, and gave him the urge to fight back, to refuse to accept that this was over, just like he refused to accept a game was over until the buzzer sounded.

"Look," Shane said, "the whole point of this was so you could stay in Canada. We kept it a secret at first, because we thought people would be less likely to believe it if it was public—and because it would be a hot fucking mess in the press and with our teams—but now it's the other way around. If people find out it was a lie, you'll get deported and I'll get kicked out of the NHL and probably arrested." Part of him thought he was exaggerating, but another part could imagine the look that would be on Coach Theriault’s face and thought that all bets were off on NHL protection when it came to the Canadian government.

Ilya's face twisted with stress. "Fuck."

"But how hard is it to keep it up? It's not like we lied about being

married. We really are. It's pretty hard to prove two people don't love each other."

Ilya snorted. "Yes, we are very convincing."

Shane rubbed his hands back through his hair, pushing it away from his forehead. "We barely have to see each other, Ilya. Our schedules never overlap except when we're playing each other. We live in different cities, and no one will expect that to change. We can get a divorce at the end of the season. Since everyone knows now, we might as well. The press will have a field day, but not as bad as them finding out it was all fake. We'll say it was too hard balancing NHL careers and our marriage and we're parting amicably." He paused. "As amicably as we do anything."

Ilya stared at Shane for a long, quiet moment. "You would really do that?"

Shane shrugged, looking away. "It's not just for you. I could get in big trouble too." Worse trouble than he was about to be in for being married to his rival.

Ilya nodded. "Okay. So we are married. And now we are married for real, in front of everyone else."

"Yes."

Ilya smiled again. "You are one lucky man, Shane Hollander. Twitter will be very unhappy to find out I am taken, now."

Shane rolled his eyes and shook his head. "You wish, Rozanov. All my press questions for the whole season will be why I settled for someone as obnoxious as you."

"All your press questions will be about how good I am in bed."

A fire ignited in Shane's stomach, and he swallowed it back down, clearing his throat and taking a step back. "We should go back out. I'm sure a lot of people are looking for us." He stared at the doorknob, but couldn't quite bring himself to reach for it.

"Are you okay?" Ilya asked softly.

"I honestly don't know. Are you?"

“We will see. My team will be fine, I think. They are…different. Good.

But will be a problem with Russia, my family."

"Shit." That was a whole new dimension Shane had no idea what to do with.

Ilya shrugged, though there was still a tightness around his eyes. "Problem for later." He nodded towards Shane's phone, which was basically buzzing continuously in his hand.

"I have a lot of calls to make."

Ilya nodded. "Make the calls. I will go back out."

"Don't—" Shane huffed out a sigh. "We probably shouldn't give too many details to the press until we've talked to our agents and team management."

"Yes. I will go talk to my team. Okay? No reporters."

"Okay. Thank you."

Ilya's hand sort of fluttered in the air for a moment before falling to his side, and Shane wondered what he'd been planning on doing. Then he was gone, and Shane was alone.

He pulled out his phone and scrolled through the missed calls and voicemails, wincing with guilt and grief when he clicked Farah's number before his parents'.

She picked up right away. "Shane."

"Hi."

"You've seen it?"

"I've seen it."

"And it's really you? And Ilya Rozanov?"

Shane sighed. If even Farah, who was endlessly kind and understanding, couldn't keep the incredulity out of her voice, he was fucked with anyone else. "Yes."

But then she laughed. Not cruelly, but maybe a little pleased. "I thought so."

"What?"

"The hotel restaurant with birds in it? Your date I accidentally interrupted. That was the day before, right? And it was Ilya with you. I thought I heard his voice before we disconnected, but obviously I was going to leave it up to you if you wanted to tell me what was going on or not."

"Well. The ship's kind of sailed on that."

"I'm so sorry, Shane. I hate that you guys had that taken away from you. I wish there was a way to put it back in the box, but I have to be pragmatic and tell you that there isn't."

"I know." Shane perched himself on the edge of Harris's desk. "I wouldn't ask you to try. I just—We just want to do whatever we can not to make this a bigger deal than it has to be."

There was a gentle pause. "It's going to be a pretty big deal," Farah said. "I'm sorry."

"I'm locked in the Ottawa Centaur's social media manager's office, and Ilya and I are supposed to play each other in two hours. If you can help me figure out what to do right now, we can talk in more detail later. But I need to get through tonight."

"Okay." Farah had her game-voice on now. "We can do that."

In the end, a plan wasn't really necessary. Shane was instructed to stay away from the press until after he talked to his team, and as soon as Coach Theriault sat him down in his office, he knew he was being benched.

The game started without either team's star forward, and they were both kept away from reporters at all costs, so Shane spent most of the game just sitting around, feeling like shit, and wondering what was going to happen to them now.

It seemed impossible that this would just blow over and they'd be able to go back to doing what this had all been for—playing hockey—but Shane also didn't know how to fix it. If they admitted their marriage was a sham to appease everyone who had based their whole news cycle on a Hollander-Rozanov rivalry, they'd no doubt get a knock on the door from Immigration. Shane would much rather be in trouble with the NHL than the Canadian government, so their only real choice was to convince everyone that they really were in love, had been this whole time, and they'd kept it secret for several obvious reasons.

Considering all the drama surrounding them, it wouldn't be much of a surprise to anyone if the marriage didn't last long, so all Shane could think to do was stay married, both on paper and in the eyes of the pubic, until Ilya was sure his paperwork was secure and they could get a divorce, citing irreconcilable differences.

No one who'd ever watched an NHL hockey game would find it hard to believe that Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov had irreconcilable differences. The impossible part would be looking like they loved each other in the meantime.

One of the Voyageurs team admins got Shane a car and sent him back to the hotel after the second intermission, wanting to make sure he didn't get swarmed in the lobby after the game. He wondered if Ilya was also at home, but couldn't quite bring himself to text and find out. Instead, unable to put it off any longer, he called his parents.

Both Yuna and David were terribly hurt that Shane hadn't told them he was gay, let alone that he was dating Ilya Rozanov, let alone that they'd gotten married, and by the time he got off the phone, Shane's throat was tight around the hundred *sorrys* he'd choked out and his eyes were hot. He took a shower, and when he came out, there was a text from Ilya on his phone.

What is your hotel room number?

Why?

We have to talk more about this.

1822

Okay. Twenty minutes?

Fine.

Shane ordered room service while he waited, but Ilya arrived first, wearing a dark hoodie and a baseball cap pulled low. "Hi," Shane said. "Very incognito."

"Hmm? What is that word?"

"Uh. Like…secret. Keeping your identity a secret." He gestured to Ilya's outfit.

Ilya laughed, but it lacked his usual warmth. "I try not to be seen."

"What did your team say?"

"I was out for this game, but back for next. Mostly because they did not want me to have to talk to reporters before they know what they want me to say. You?"

"They were really mad. I hope I'll be back next game, but I'm not sure."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

Shane shrugged it off. He sat on the edge of his bed and Ilya sat beside him. "I talked to my parents."

"Did you tell them the truth?"

"No. I don't think they'd be okay with what we did. This is better, even if they find it hard to understand."

Ilya was quiet for a moment. "So, before, you said we could not get a divorce because it was too risky. Now you want to?"

"I guess we should…wait a while. Make sure it's convincing. It's probably better in the summer when there's less attention on us. We can wait until some NFL player gets caught cheating on his wife or something to announce it."

Ilya nodded.

"Farah told me we should make some personal posts about it. And the Voyageurs' comms people said that was okay as long as we're not too detailed. But at least it'll stop people speculating if it's real or not. And we'll need rings or people will wonder. We can't wear hair ties on our fingers in press photos." Shane didn't mention that his was still tucked in his wallet, didn't ask Ilya if his had just ended up in a drawer with his other hair ties after the wedding.

"Sounds good to me. I will buy them and send you one."

"You don't have to do that."

Ilya smirked. "But I am the one who proposed, so I give you the ring, right?"

"I guess. As long as it's not too gaudy."

"What's gaudy?"

Shane shot him a look. "That bear tattoo of yours, for one."

Ilya chuckled. "Have you been looking at my pictures in *Men's Health,* Hollander? Torn any of them out for over your bed?"

"I tore a few of them *up.* But I don't need to see pictures to know about that tattoo. Everyone knows about the tattoo, Rozanov."

"But you have seen the pictures." Ilya quirked an eyebrow and leaned a little closer.

"I may have flipped by on my way to an article about performance diets," Shane admitted haughtily, but he knew his cheeks were turning pink. They'd been really, *really* hot pictures. "Just…keep the rings simple, okay?"

"Okay." Ilya dug his phone out and rolled it between his hands. "We should post a picture. On social media. Like your agent said."

"Um. Oh." Shane had been planning to post something like: *The video is real and we are married,* but a picture made more sense even if it was more awkward. He was already failing to look married and they hadn't even started yet.

Ilya smiled and hooked his arm around Shane's shoulder then pulled him in tight against his body. "Look happy," he whispered, right in Shane's ear, which was only bringing 'happiness' to one very specific part of Shane's body. And then he kissed Shane's cheek and took the picture.

Ilya beamed down at the photo. "Is very cute. We are best couple in NHL."

That made Shane laugh and some of the tension drifted away with it. The picture, he thought, looked awful. Ilya had his eyes closed, lips pressed to Shane's cheek, and Shane was managing to look mortified and terrified at the same time. Though, he was smiling…sort of. If you weren't inside his brain, it might look like he was smiling, blushing at Ilya's affection instead of panicking at how much of their bodies were suddenly touching.

Ilya started typing, and Shane realized he was composing the post already. "What is the saying?" Ilya asked. "The cat has come out of the backpack?"

Shane opened his mouth to correct him then snapped it shut again. He

nodded. "Yup, that's the saying."

Ilya finished typing and held his phone up for Shane to read.

Well, the cat has come out of the backpack! This is my husband. I love him almost as much as I love beating the Voyageurs 😈 Thanks for your support! 💔🌈

Shane couldn't help smiling. "Yeah, that's pretty good."

Ilya hit post, and Shane shared the post on his own accounts, then turned off all his notifications. He set his phone face down on the bedside table. "This is going to be crazy, isn't it?" he asked, even though it already had been.

"Will be good. I am excellent husband." Ilya hooked him again, reeling him in for a side hug. Shane didn't know how to feel about receiving that sort of casual affection when there wasn't anyone to witness it, but he supposed he should probably try to practice looking more comfortable touching Ilya. There were going to be watchful eyes on them all the time. Speaking of that…

"We have to both be really careful not to end up in the news for anything else," Shane said, not knowing how else to ask Ilya not to be caught with a movie star's daughter grinding on him at a club.

"No problem. I am…what is it? Incognito?"

Shane laughed. "Yeah, sure. We'll see how long that lasts."

"Okay. I let you sleep. Tomorrow, both our teams will want many meetings."

"Yeah."

Ilya got up and headed for the door. "Oh," he paused, then turned and smiled at Shane. "You guys won tonight."

Shane grinned.

"We will get you next time."

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It was over an hour before Shane found the courage to look at his phone again, but luckily all he found was a few email updates from Farah that he saved for later, a text from his dad saying, *We love you,*

which almost made him burst into tears, and thirteen texts from Ilya, all screenshots from social media. He settled back against his pillows and started to read, smile growing wider with each picture.

If you'd told me yesterday that Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander would be #gaymarriagegoals I'd have told you you were crazy but here we are #hollanov

I've admired @shanehollanderhockeyplayer forever but never more than today. #hollanov

Yesterday the only gay hockey players I knew about were @scotthunter and myself. Imagine my excitement today #hollanov

Thank you @therealilyarozanov and @shanehollanderhockeyplayer for showing us all what love can look like. You made me feel brave enough to come out to my parents tonight. My boyfriend is coming over for dinner tomorrow. #hollanov #loveislove

Don't ever let anyone tell you you can't have the enemies to lovers arc of your dreams #hollanov

Wouldn't mind being the filling in that sandwich #hollanov □

The award for being a queer hockey icon is a Stanley Cup, so will it go to @montrealvoyageurs or @ottawacentaurs?

I'm watching hockey for the first time because of #hollanov and the real surprise is that anyone is straight

My boyfriend is a @montrealvoyageurs fan and I'm an @ottawacentaurs fan but if #hollanov can work it out I guess we can too.

Even in hockey all the hottest ones are gay?! Seriously though, @therealilyarozanov and @shanehollanderhockeyplayer I cried happy tears. I'm so sorry you didn't get to come out on your own terms but you're an inspiration and don't listen to the inevitable haters – we're rooting for both of you #hollanov

Shane actually laughed when he logged on himself and saw that #thecatisoutofthebackpack was also trending. He closed it soon after, though. It wasn't the negativity and homophobia he'd spotted that drove him away—that was no surprise, and there were at least as many posts of the variety Ilya had shared. No, it was seeing the words 'queer icon' and 'gay icon' and 'marriage goals' over and over.

Fuck, he felt like a fraud. He'd never even actually kissed a man, not properly. Not for real, for reasons other than an immigration wedding. At the same moment that his marriage was opening a world of possibilities for others, a world of possibilities was closing for him. He wanted to kiss a man too—he wanted to do lots of things with a man—but he already knew that he just couldn't risk it. Not while all of this was going on. Not while his marriage was an inspiration.

His marriage to the one man he was allowed to kiss and absolutely shouldn't.

The cat was really out of the backpack now, and there was no putting it back in.

Chapter 5: The Public

December, 2011 – Montreal, QC

"What's it going to be like, playing against your husband?" asked the forty-fifth person in a row.

Creative question, Shane thought as he leaned into the microphone, pretending to think about it. "It's going to be a game like any other game. We've been competing against each other since Juniors, and once we're out on the ice we both just want to win. Montreal always loves to beat Ottawa, especially on home ice, so we're just going to give it our all out there."

"Does the winner get to pick tonight's date night spot?" the reporter joked, and Shane had to admit that was better than subtly asking if the homophobia-of-the-week was actually well-founded.

Shane forced a little laugh. "I hope we're both too tired after today's game to go out somewhere." He paused. "Because we're going to leave it all on the ice. Uh. Hopefully."

The reporter gave an uncomfortable little chuckle, clearly not sure how to follow up on Shane's awkwardness.

But then a solid body collided with Shane's side, catching him at the last minute so he didn't go flying off camera. "Good evening, sweetheart." Of course it was Ilya.

"How did you get back here?" Shane asked, realizing a moment too late that he sounded annoyed instead of delighted. "Hi," he tried instead.

"Hi." Ilya beamed down at Shane like he hung the moon and how did he *do* that? Shane was pretty sure every time he tried to look affectionate, he just looked constipated instead. "What are we talking about?" Ilya turned to the reporter.

"What tonight's winner gets," the reporter said, clearly delighted to have them both on camera together.

Ilya chuckled darkly. "Can we say that on family television?"

Shane pinched him hard on the elbow. "The winner gets bragging rights."

"Well, good luck to both of you!" the reporter said, and Shane thanked him, then dragged Ilya away.

"I feel like everyone's expecting us to do something crazy tonight," Shane muttered. He spun his new gold band around his finger absently. He still wasn't used to it, nor was he used to the one that glinted on Ilya's finger either. They'd both take them off to play, but they looked good in pictures.

"Like what?" Ilya sparkled at him.

Shane rolled his eyes. "Make out at center ice?"

"That would make the faceoff more interesting."

"People keep asking me if it makes me sad to have to score against my husband's team." Shane flopped backwards to lean against the cinderblock wall. "As if we haven't already been married for two years, playing each other the whole time."

"Yes, but you go cry in the locker room after every goal." Ilya pouted exaggeratedly. "You break my heart and you are good, polite Canadian boy so you feel very sad about it."

Shane smiled back. "I'm sure you'd feel the same if you ever managed to score on us."

Ottawa's goalie Wyatt Hayes appeared around the corner and gave Shane a bump in the shoulder. "Hey, Hollander. This guy bothering you?"

"Every minute of every day."

"So flattered you think about me that much, Hollander," Ilya replied with a charming smile.

"Coach thinks you're fraternizing with the enemy," Hayes told Ilya. "Wants us all back."

"He is not wrong." Ilya winked at Shane, grabbed him by the front of his t-shirt and kissed his forehead. "See you out there."

"See you," Shane mumbled, stomach churning at the cool spot he could still feel on his forehead where Ilya had just pressed his lips. Shane did a loop around the back halls of the arena to clear his head, and steel himself to return to the locker room and the glares his team

had met him with ever since Ilya had entered the picture. It was time for game mode.

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Ilya winked again from under his visor as they skated up for their twentieth faceoff of the game. He had every reason to be in a good mood. Ottawa was up by two, and one of those goals was Ilya's. Shane tried to level him with his most devastating glare, but that only seemed to brighten Ilya's day further.

"I think you have a choice, Hollander," Ilya said around his mouth guard.

"I probably can't stop you from telling me my options, can I?"

Predictably, Ilya ignored him. "When I win, do you want to give me a reward? Or do you want me to make you feel better after losing as only the husband can?"

Well that line of thinking wasn't going to do anyone any good. "That's an easy choice," Shane said, enjoying the momentary flash of surprise on Ilya's face, though it quickly turned smug.

"You are going to be easy?"

"No. I'm going to win."

He did not win. Not the faceoff, and not the game.

***

Shane was ninety-five percent sure that Ilya's faceoff flirting didn't mean he had any real marital expectations, but after the game it became clear that everyone else did.

Hayden peeled his shirt off and flicked it at Shane. "Bunch of guys are going out to Santos for drinks after with some of the Cens." Shane knew without asking that included Ilya. "You coming?"

Shane wanted to go home. He wanted to stand under the shower for too long then go home, put on his softest pants, and think about anything except Ilya Rozanov. But he couldn't imagine that any real married couple would give up on their first opportunity to be out together, and he knew he'd hear no end of it from Ilya if he didn't show. "Sure."

Hayden looked delighted, which made Shane feel guilty that this chaos was what it took to get him to go out with his friend. It just hadn't felt like most of the Montreal players even wanted him there most of the time. They'd been distant and cold since his marriage was outed, and Shane found it hard to blame them. His relationship with Ilya couldn't have been easy to swallow. He didn't want to go, they didn't want him to go, it was best if he stayed home. Not tonight, though, because now he and Ilya needed to keep up appearances.

Shane was struck with a sudden, horrifying thought: where was Ilya planning to spend the night? He had a hotel room with the rest of the Centaurs, of course, but all anyone could talk about was how this game was the first time the two of them were playing in the same city as an out, married couple. Surely if Ilya rolled up to his hotel all by himself, his teammates and any press that caught wind of it would be deeply suspicious or at least, cruelly mocking. It was bad enough having the entire press cycle be about him and Ilya; it would be *mortifying* if it was dragged out by rumours that their marriage was on the rocks already. Or that Shane was such a poor sport that he wouldn't let his husband sleep over after a loss.

But Ilya couldn't stay at Shane's place, could he?

Shane mused on that through his shower, getting dressed, and answering more inane questions about how weird it must be to do something he'd been doing for his entire NHL career.

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Between the press conference and the crowded tapas bar, Shane was starting to feel kind of like a damsel in distress. Not that he necessarily minded the general idea of Ilya coming to his rescue as much as he probably should, but it was inherently frustrating for him to feel so out of his element. With a stick in his hands and a puck on the ice, he always knew what to do. He could answer questions about even high-level game strategy in more than one language. But put a ring on his finger and a kiss on his cheek? He barely even knew what to do with his hands anymore, let alone his words.

Ilya wasn’t even the only Centaur saving him tonight. Despite the close game, everyone was in reasonably friendly spirits but without the edge of meanness that would make Shane never consider going out with a team like Toronto. He spent a good twenty minutes talking to Hayes and even found himself warming up to Barrett a little. Barrett didn’t seem any more interested in talking about things other

than hockey than Shane was, and it was a welcome reprieve from the expectations.

Because there were those expectations again. He'd known it, before he'd come; that they had an image to project. That there would be surreptitious camera phone shots of them being coupley or whatever on the internet tomorrow. And eventually, he had to concede that this did mean *Ilya to the rescue* after all. When Shane wasn't trying to fend him off, he was all in on the husband ruse. He was distressingly believable. With every slide of his hand around Shane's waist, every whisper in his ear, every brush of his fingers on Shane's chest, every glance at the dip of Shane's collarbone from where he'd undone some buttons, Shane came closer himself to believing that Ilya Rozanov adored the shit out of him.

This was a dangerous fucking game. It felt like the playoffs for a series he hadn't known he was in, with rules he was still learning. Was it okay for him to be sitting in Ilya's lap, with his thick arms around Shane's waist and his thicker thighs under Shane's ass? It felt okay. It felt more than fucking okay. Was it okay for them to be interacting with each other's teammates like this? Whose side was he supposed to take when they did? Or when Ilya was an asshole, because apparently *Shane* and *The Voyageurs* occupied two entirely separate areas of Ilya's relationship protocol.

"Boiziau!" Ilya said boisterously when J.J. approached them. "You hate me so much, yes?"

Shane would have covered his face in his hand if he hadn't had a drink in one and Ilya's fingers in the other. Like J.J. needed any more excuses. He had been cool with Shane being gay, truly, and Shane appreciated that. Discrimination in the league was a big deal to both of them, and something they'd talked about a little in the past—though Shane's experiences with racism being half Japanese and J.J.'s being Black were different—and J.J. had made it clear he was just as much an ally in this. But that had not extended in the slightest towards the Ilya thing. Hayden was the only one on the Voyageurs who wasn't pissed about it, and he was the only one who knew the truth.

When J.J. only stared at Ilya in apparent shock at being addressed so bluntly, Ilya continued good-naturedly. "Is okay. I work very hard to make other teams hate me. Probably worse than usual tonight, yes? Since I stopped you from scoring."

God, Ilya was an asshole. It was so brazen that J.J. finally just started to laugh incredulously, and a tiny bit of hope flared in Shane's chest. The rest of his team wasn't willing to try and understand this thing between him and Ilya, but maybe J.J. would be.

“You’re a piece of work, Rozanov.”

“Yes,” Ilya agreed easily. “But you are my husband’s friend, so I will also work a little hard to be nice.”

“You’re doing great so far.” J.J.’s voice dripped with sarcasm that Ilya batted away as easily as a loose puck.

“Is nice to say. Shane, you did not tell me your friends are so nice.” Shane just shook his head and took a drink, the universal sign of *oh no keep me out of this.* He didn’t even know if he’d describe the team, beyond Hayden and J.J., as his friends.

“And Shane, you still haven’t told me why you married such an asshole.” J.J. tried to glare, but the corners of his mouth were twitching. Ilya was starting to charm him, as he did everyone in the end.

“He grows on you,” Shane said on a sigh. It felt like the truest thing he’d said all day.

“My friends call me Roz,” Ilya said to J.J., while leaning around Shane to flag over the bartender. It made the muscles of his thighs shift temptingly under Shane’s legs.

“Rozanov is fine,” J.J. snorted. “What does Shane call you then?”

“Ilya.” There was a tender note in his voice that made Shane look at him in surprise. It just…felt like something that should be hard to fake. But it didn’t last long. “Except if we’re having some fun and then he calls me—”

“I’m going to stop you before you say something I can never unhear.” J.J. sighed and looked at the pressed tin ceiling like he was seeking guidance from a higher power. Then he looked at Ilya, and Shane cozy in his lap, and Shane could see the moment when he really decided to try.

It meant more to him than it should, for something that was technically a sham. But it meant that J.J.’s friendship–and acceptance of Shane’s sexuality–wasn’t conditional on choosing the ‘right’ partner.

And based on the way the few other Voyageurs who had come out with them had avoided him tonight, as usual, that spirit was thin on the ground. “My friends call me J.J.,” he said on a rushed exhale. Shane thought if he looked at Ilya he’d be grinning like the cat who’d caught the canary.

“I will buy you a drink, J.J.. We can toast to a man neither of us hates.” Ilya squeezed Shane lightly, and Shane had the weirdest urge to kiss him. And then he remembered that would be a coupley thing to do, panicked, and pressed the briefest kiss to the side of Ilya’s head. Even that made him blush like a cherry, but Ilya made a satisfied hum that Shane could feel through everywhere their bodies touched. Which was…a lot of places.

Maybe Ilya *should* come back to Shane’s place tonight after all. Just to keep up appearances. They’d come this far.

“To Shane,” Ilya said. “Who lost tonight but will win in the—” Shane got his hand over Ilya’s mouth just in time to muffle whatever words accompanied the wicked look in his eye.

“To Shane,” J.J. agreed, raising his cocktail. “Who puts up with a lot more than anyone should have to, when he just wants to play hockey.” There was nothing joking in his words, and he looked at Shane soberly when he said them. Teasing, the words could have been about Ilya. As it was, Shane found himself holding his breath. It was the first time someone on his team had acknowledged, even sidelong, that all was not right in Montreal.

When he glanced at Ilya, he found him looking at J.J. as if he was seeing him for the first time and liking what he saw. “I’ll drink to that,” he murmured.

They left together not long after, to lukewarm goodbyes from the remaining Voyageurs and friendly whoops from the Centaurs. A few of Ilya's teammates high-fived him on the way out.

“Seems like overkill,” Shane said gruffly while they waited for the car service.

Ilya eyed him curiously. "They are just happy for us."

"For you, maybe," Shane muttered, but before Ilya could ask what he meant, he flagged the car down and trotted over to it. He opened the door and gestured Ilya in.

"Do you not cheer for your friends when they're going to get laid?" Ilya smirked at him. "You know that's what they think is about to happen. We are finally in the same place and don't need to hide."

Shane *did* know. It was all he'd been able to think about all night. It was reasonable to think that a married couple that had been apart for over a month would want to spend the night. But where was Ilya *actually* going to spend the night?

"The Four Seasons, *s'il vous plaît* ," Ilya said to the driver, and he pulled out into the street.

Shane glanced at him, confused. That wasn't the same hotel the rest of the Cens were staying at.

“What? I got a room at another hotel. They expect I will go home with you.” Ilya said it all factually, not like an invitation or a request, but Shane thought an opportunity was probably there if he wanted it, especially with the way Ilya's fingers had drifted up his thigh earlier. Did he want it? Did he want to keep being swept along and off his feet tonight? What was expected, now that it was just the two of them? They didn't have to keep up appearances, but instead of the tension that had built all night lessening as soon as they were alone, it was ramping up.

Maybe Shane was the only one ramping it up, all in his mind.

Ilya’s hazel eyes gleamed gold in the light of the passing streetlights. There was no clue in them. He was just watching to see what Shane would do. It was one of those unnerving moments when he wasn’t actually an asshole, when instead he seemed to be making room for Shane to figure out what he needed.

And what he needed was his life back, just for a little while.

“Yeah, makes sense,” Shane said. “I’ll see you at the CCM Pride shoot next week, right?”

“Yes,” Ilya said, leaning back so that his eyes were in shadow. “Will be very gay.”

Shane snorted. "It's nice."

The car slowed to a stop outside the hotel, and Ilya shot Shane another look. "Very nice," he said, and it sounded like he was saying something else but Shane didn't know what. "Goodnight, Hollander."

"Goodnight."

Ilya disappeared through the hotel's front door, and Shane gave the driver his address. He leaned his forehead against the window as Montreal flashed by. It had been so much easier not to think about the way Ilya made him feel before they were outed, but now it felt like half the world was cheering on this idea of the two of them together, and Shane couldn't get it out of his head. It was getting harder and harder to convince himself it was because Ilya was the first man he'd looked at that way.

What would have happened if Ilya hadn't had a hotel room? If he'd asked to come to Shane's place, or, in his irritating Ilya way, just assumed he would come over?

With the echoes of Ilya's hands drifting all over him…Shane would have been hard-pressed to say no.

December, 2011 - Toronto, Ontario

Shane kind of loved the CCM Pride line. The jackets and jerseys were sleek and black but all of the trim, stripes, and logos were rainbow. It was the kind of thing he'd happily wear regularly, and he let the beaming staff know to contact Farah about getting him set up in the full line.

The only thing he liked better than the new CCM gear itself was Ilya Rozanov in it. The synthetic fabric seemed like it was perfectly cut to highlight the solid width of his shoulders, the shapely cut-in of his waist, and the superior solidity of his huge thighs, not to mention the utter glory that was his ass. As always, llya made everything look good, and the twisting up of his hair by a man wielding a can of hairspray and a comb plus a thin layer of makeup to even everything out rocked him solidly in movie star territory. Shane was grateful for the crowd of people constantly buzzing around them because it gave him a good excuse for staring at Ilya for far too long.

The shoot itself wasn't actually all that gay.

For the first hour, they had mostly filmed them getting dressed: zippers going up, laces being tied, rainbows on socks being revealed. Shane was looking forward to getting out on the ice, but once they did, it was a lot of hurry up and wait.

First they wanted to shoot Ilya skating really fast, then Shane skating really fast, then both of them skating really fast in the same direction. It was like a very basic warm up but Shane had to think about things like the angle of the camera and keeping both of them in frame. A production assistant tossed some rainbow-branded pucks on the ice and they spent a long time trying to get the perfect slapshots on film.

"Okay, that's it for action shots!" the director of photography, Harper, called, and Shane and Ilya skated up to the boards for further instructions.

“So, we'd like to do a final set focused on you two as a couple.” she said. “We're planning to continue the series we started with Scott Hunter, and for his shoot we mostly just had him skating, but we also brought Kip onto the ice a little bit at the end and they recreated their iconic kiss. Is that something you’d want to do as well? No pressure, of course.”

"Do we have an iconic kiss?" Shane asked, stupidly.

Ilya shot him a sly smile. "Have you forgotten our wedding already, sweetheart? The one the whole world saw?" He leaned back against the boards, sparkling eyes fixed on Shane.

"Oh. Right. That one." Shane glanced at Harper who was giving him an odd look. "There's just been so many," he added with an awkward shrug, and Ilya slid one foot forward to bump the toe of his skate against Shane's.

"It's okay if you're not comfortable with it. Maybe we could do a face-off or something…?"

"No, is okay," Ilya said. "We can do a kiss."

Shane raised an eyebrow at him. "We can?"

"Hunter did a kiss with his smoothie boyfriend." Ilya bristled with indignation at the mere idea that they could be upstaged by Scott Hunter, and Shane was caught between laughing at him or agreeing with him. Because yeah, actually, *fuck* being upstaged by Scott Hunter. Shane thought back to the screenshots Ilya had sent him after they'd first posted about being married. Maybe a photoshoot like this could reach even more people.

"Yeah, we can do it," Shane said.

"Okay, great! You can play with it, have fun, ham it up a bit. Don't be shy! Helmets off, and Ilya, do you mind taking your hair down? We'll get you both fixed up with hair and makeup first. I'll be right back." Harper stepped over to the group of chairs her team had turned into an HQ and started discussing things with the photographers that involved a lot of hand movements.

“Is good,” Ilya murmured so that only Shane could hear as they took their helmets off. “I do not like the video of our kiss.”

Shane wouldn’t be the first one to defend it, but he couldn’t help but take a little bit of offense. It had been a nice kiss, hadn’t it? “What’s wrong with it?”

“People think that is how I kiss my husband. No passion. Less than Scott Hunter. Is embarrassing.” He tugged his hair tie free and his curls tumbled around his face again, rocketing Shane back to that afternoon in Niagara Falls. Somehow, just two years later, Ilya was even more handsome, beaming over at Shane like he'd never enjoyed a day more than one spent on the ice with him. Shane couldn't exactly deny that was true for him too. Even when they weren't competing, just being out on the ice and skating with Ilya was fun. He always made Shane feel like there was a fire lit under him. In more ways than one.

"Okay, just stand here…" They were directed into place at center ice after the hair and makeup team touched them up. "Whenever you're ready!"

The photographers lifted their cameras, and Shane just stared at Ilya. "So, uh. How do you kiss your husband, then?" he asked, not knowing where he was supposed to put his hands or what kind of kiss Ilya was thinking this would be.

Ilya shifted forward and reached out to bring his arms around Shane. He fisted his hand in the back of Shane’s jersey and pulled them together. He hesitated only a moment, quickly searching Shane’s eyes —for what, Shane didn’t know—but with Ilya’s big body pressed against his, he knew that the only thing Ilya would find were the blown pupils of barely controlled arousal. Shane swallowed hard.

Ilya smirked in satisfaction and brought his lips close to Shane’s so that his next words brushed against them and flooded Shane with the rush of anticipation. “Like this,” Ilya growled, and he crushed their mouths together.

If Shane had thought their kiss at the wedding had sparked something, this was the bonfire that it ignited. Ilya guided Shane's mouth against his, slotting their lips together perfectly. There was none of the hesitancy that had dominated their first kiss. This kiss was all about passion, and Shane could not believe it was all an act to upstage Scott's photoshoot. Even if Ilya didn't really like Shane, he sure as shit *wanted* him because even though Shane's experience with kissing was somewhat limited, this one blew every one of his previous tries out of the water.

Ilya's body was hot and firm against his, using his extra inches to bend Shane back a little, which swung his skates forward, sliding his left leg between Ilya's. Shane threw his arms around Ilya's neck, all but hanging off him as he tentatively brushed his tongue along the seam of Ilya's lips.

Ilya gave immediately, opening his mouth and seeking out a taste of Shane. Shane's blood was on fire at the contact as it flushed from the back of his neck down to his crotch. He wanted that tongue everywhere. He wanted to taste Ilya everywhere. If the checkbox that was his sexuality had only been filled in with pencil before, now it was gone over twice in marker. And underlined.

Ilya tilted his head to the side, seeking more, finding a different angle, and Shane let himself be plied. Ilya nipped at his lower lip, teeth sharp but gentle, then drew him into a toe-curling kiss again.

Shane tilted back more, which threw off his balance more, and his hands twitched in a natural response to catch himself, but he didn't need to; Ilya had him held fast, pinned tight against him, so he couldn't have fallen if he'd tried.

Shane's new awareness of his fingers had him reaching up with them, finally getting to tangle them in those tantalizing bronze curls, and it felt like a victory, getting them caught between his fingers.

Ilya groaned when Shane tugged a little and the hands wrapped around his back slid lower, following the curve of Shane's muscles, hugged by the contoured athletic wear.

There was the distinct sound of someone clearing their throat, and Shane remembered—like being hit by a car—where they were.

He tore himself out of Ilya's hold, which almost knocked him on his ass, but Ilya grabbed him and scooped him back on his feet, laughing. "Um," Shane said. He couldn't look the photographer in the eye.

Ilya used the arm still around Shane's waist to tug him closer, into a half-hug, and he turned to the assembled camera crew. Shane peeked at them and they were looking a variety of: embarrassed, impressed, uncertain, and a little into it.

"So," Ilya said, "did we get the shot?"

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Shane didn't know if Ilya was having as much trouble as he was not jumping on him in the showers because he was not. Going. To look at him. He'd stripped as efficiently as possible, facing away from Ilya to try to conceal the fact that their on-ice make out session had left him fully hard. If Ilya noticed when he joined Shane in the showers that Shane's water was as cold as he could tolerate, he didn't say anything.

Shane imagined he could feel Ilya's eyes tracking the line of Shane's shoulders, dropping down his back to his ass and the way the water ran down his legs. *Fuck,* was there a shower cold enough for this? Shane forced himself to imagine any of the many staff members who were wrangling them today walking into the locker room to find them and expecting two professionals taking normal, professional showers. Married men who had been intimate countless times before and weren't burning up because they'd gotten swept up in the moment and it had just been so fucking long since they'd been able to touch anyone.

As soon as he could, Shane slapped the water off and all but ran back to his clothes, pulling them on hurriedly after only a cursory toweling-off.

He just needed some alone time so he could try to deal with the fact that he'd just had the best kiss of his life and it had only been for show. But he wasn't even going to feel guilty for jerking off when he got back to his hotel room tonight.

Chapter 6: The Setup

"We got you a room at the Delta," the overly chipper assistant said, popping into the locker room without warning while Ilya was still pulling on his shirt. Shane turned red, despite already being fully dressed, and felt freshly justified in keeping his shower as short and icy as possible. "Just give your names at the desk and they'll take care of you. The car will be here in about five minutes."

A room, echoed in Shane's mind. One room, of course, because they were married. And CCM was *super duper* supportive of that. So they got them *a room.*

"Thank you," Ilya said smoothly, while Shane's brain was still rebooting. He circled Shane's waist with his arm, and Shane had to resist the instinct to shake him off. "I think my husband here is a little tired from trying to keep up with me out there." *Tired* was not the word for what Shane was.

Shane glared. "You wish." He reached out to shake the assistant's hand, knowing it was too little too late, but she smiled at him. "Thank you. Hope you got some good shots."

"It was great!" She turned away, and Shane was finally able to dig his fingers in Ilya's ribs, forcing him to release him. Ilya smirked, because of course he did, and they picked up their stuff and followed the assistant out front where their car picked them up.

"You almost looked like a real hockey player out there," Ilya teased while they made their way through downtown traffic. "Hopefully they have that—what is it? Photoshop."

"Shut up," Shane grumbled, his mind too caught up on what the rest of the evening was going to be like to think of a snappy comeback. His body knew what it wanted, after that explosive kiss, but Ilya looked entirely unaffected, so Shane was probably in for a night of lying awake, listening to Ilya sleep deeply, while his dick filed complaint after complaint about the situation.

Ilya dropped his eyes to his phone and left Shane alone for the rest of the ride. At the front desk, he smiled flirtily at the receptionist, and she blushed, giggling. "Yes, sir, Mr. Rozanov. I'll get you both booked in." She smiled at Shane distractedly.

Well, there went any chance of getting a second room on the down low. She clearly recognized them both, though it was also clear which player she preferred. Shane resisted the urge to huff, not because it would give anything away—if anything it'd be good for their story—but because he wouldn't be able to spend another minute with the smugness Ilya would exude from every pore if he thought it at all possible that Shane was jealous.

"Let's go, darling," Shane said through clenched teeth. They slipped into the empty elevator.

"Do you think there will be champagne and rose petals on the bed?" Ilya asked cheerfully.

"I hope it's something stronger than champagne," Shane muttered.

Ilya bumped their shoulders together. "Aren't you having fun? No? You are so boring, Hollander."

"Well, you're the one who's stuck with me." The doors opened, and Shane tried not to stomp down the hall to 1410. Thankfully, the room had two queen beds, but it was a small comfort in the face of a whole night with Ilya Rozanov. "You'd better not snore."

Ilya laughed. "No one has ever had any complaints."

Shane dumped his bag on the bed farthest from the window, something occurring to him. "Have there been…a lot? Of people who could complain?"

Ilya shot Shane a curious look. "Yes."

Shane peeled open the zipper on his duffel. "Like…recently?"

"You mean have I had sex with anyone since our marriage came out?"

"Yeah."

"No." He frowned. "I would not do that to you, Hollander."

"It's not *really* cheating," Shane acknowledged.

"No, it is. Because we have a deal, and I won't break it. Same thing, no?"

Shane shrugged. "I guess." But something that had been churning in him settled. Their only deal, really, was that they wouldn't end up in

the news for it, but Shane was comforted that Ilya was staying out of the game entirely. Because of the news. That was all.

"So, what? Have you been out there getting laid?" Ilya laughed.

"No."

"So tragic. A waste of someone as pretty as you."

Heat burned up the back of Shane's neck, so he grabbed his pajamas and all but ran for the bathroom. He took his time in there, brushing his teeth and changing into soft pants and an old t-shirt. It wasn't until he was back out and walked past the full length mirror that he realized the shirt was his Junior Championships shirt from the year he and Ilya got married. If he could teleport back to that night in the hotel parking lot he'd have said *run.*

Probably.

He was still proud of himself for helping Ilya play—because a Stanley Cup wasn't a Stanley Cup if he hadn't won faceoffs against Ilya Rozanov to get there—but if he'd known how chaotic this all would have been, how stressful, how—

Ilya was shirtless, just standing in front of the window, stretching out his right shoulder. He turned, eyes on Shane, and Shane was pinned to the spot, frozen. He'd been around tons of naked men, obviously, no one in the locker room was shy, but he'd never *looked.* He'd never been *invited* to look before, and there was really no other way to describe the way Ilya displayed himself to Shane.

"What are you doing?" Shane asked, more breathlessly than he'd been hoping for.

Ilya raised an eyebrow and shrugged. "Being comfortable. Trainer says I need to keep this shoulder open."

"So, I should be sure to check you on that side? Good to know." Shane tried to hide the reignition of his engine with teasing, but it sounded weak, even to him.

Ilya snorted. "You are like the breath of a butterfly when you check, Hollander. Even broken shoulder wouldn't feel that."

"You're such a dick."

"Yes." Ilya grinned, then sprawled out on his bed, somehow making it look graceful and sultry. If Shane tried that, he'd look like a baby giraffe tripping over a log. "So, if you have not had sex since before our marriage came out, how long has it been for you?"

Shane crossed his arms, realized how defensive that looked, and uncrossed them. "I guess, I don't know. Maybe eight months before that?"

"Wow."

"How often were you hooking up? You know, before." Shane climbed up on his own bed and stretched out on his side, facing Ilya and trying not to be hyper-aware of the position of all of his limbs.

Ilya shrugged. "Maybe a few times a week?"

"Huh." Shane wondered how to word his next question. "Isn't it…a lot of work?"

"Work?" Ilya laughed around the word.

"Yeah. Finding someone and picking them up and taking them home…" Shane waved his hand.

"I like that part."

"Oh."

"Not you?"

"Not really." Shane took a steadying breath. "Actually…I don't know. I—I don't—You like men and women, right?"

"Yes."

Shane chewed his lip. "I…don't."

"Ah." Ilya smiled, but it wasn't cruel or mocking. "Just men."

"Yeah."

"But you didn't sleep with men before because you didn't want anyone to find out."

"I also didn't really know yet? I guess. Took some figuring out."

The room went quiet for a moment, then Ilya sat up. "Is not really fair."

"What?"

Ilya tipped onto his feet and stalked over to the foot of Shane's bed. "Well, you have missed your chance to have fun. Does not seem fair. Also…"

"Also?"

"Also, I never got to thank you. You saved me. I am very grateful."

"Rozanov," Shane breathed, "what are you doing?"

"Thanking you." He crawled up onto Shane's bed. "Tell me you don't want it and I stop. But I got the idea, earlier, on the ice, that you don't want me to stop…"

Shane opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Ilya moved closer until he loomed over Shane, blocking the light for a moment so his curly hair flamed in a halo of gold before he kicked his leg out easily and settled over Shane, straddling his hips. The look on his face was anything but angelic. He looked like Shane's downfall.

Shane's cock was very into it, and Ilya rolled his hips in approval. Shane's eyes went wide at the feeling of Ilya's erection rubbing slowly along his own, and he moaned as his body ignited. "Yes," Ilya purred. "You will like this, I think."

He leaned down and, for a wild moment that made Shane's oversaturated mind careen with anticipation and panic, Shane thought he was about to kiss him again. If he did, Shane might self-combust. But instead, he caught Shane's hands, lifting them from the bed and intertwining their fingers. It reminded him of the time they'd said *I Do,* just like everything else seemed intent on doing today . This didn't feel at all like that, but the words thrummed through Shane even as Ilya brought one of Shane's hands to his bare chest, releasing his fingers and turning his palm so that it rested on warm skin and soft chest hair.

Shane appreciated that it wasn't directly over that damn bear tattoo, because he would have had to give Ilya shit for that somehow, and his brain wasn't working well enough for that anymore. He wasn't sure it even had any blood left flowing to it. His cock leaked sympathetically.

“I am a man,” Ilya said simply. “Is your chance.” He tilted his head a little in clear invitation.

The prompt spurred Shane’s fingers to move curiously, stroking him, starting to explore him. He kneaded the firm muscle and then brushed a slow circle over Ilya’s nipple. He could feel the way his breathing quickened, the rise and fall of his broad chest under Shane’s hand. The instant call and response of it was heady: knowing that his touch could make Ilya react the same way his own body was.

It made him bolder.

He slid the hand on Ilya’s chest down his body, skimming the grooves of his abs, snaking along his waistband to settle on his thick thigh. The other hand he turned and brought up to Ilya’s face, focusing on the rough feel of stubble under his palm and the softness of Ilya’s mouth as he ran his thumb along his bottom lip. The look on Ilya’s face was almost shell-shocked and his hands were slack at his sides, as if he hadn’t expected any of this. Shane knew he hadn’t, himself. But that seemed to be how things always were with Ilya Rozanov. He came with everything that Shane didn’t expect to do or want, but did and wanted anyway. Fuck, he *wanted.*

“Hollander,” Ilya moaned, as Shane pressed his thumb against his mouth and then onto his tongue. That pushed Ilya into action. He caught Shane’s wrist in his big, rough hand and guided two fingers into his mouth, gaze burning hot as he watched Shane’s face and sucked. His cheeks hollowed and his tongue explored the surprisingly sensitive pads of Shane’s fingers, and Shane’s whole body jerked under the grip of his thighs, a wordless plea to…to be fucked.

Shane wasn’t proud of the sound he made, and he withdrew his hand from Ilya’s thigh to press the knuckles against his own mouth. “No,” Ilya growled, reaching for his hand and pulling it away to pin it to the bed. “Do not hide.” He murmured the words again as he reached for the hem of Shane’s shirt, pulling it up and off to bare him to the world.

No, not to the world. Just to Ilya. His husband, somehow. Who was going to show him how to be with a man. Who kissed him like he wanted this. “Please,” Shane whispered. “Please.”

“What do you want, Hollander?”

The first thing that popped into Shane’s head was *everything* or maybe *fuck me until I can’t move,* but then he remembered the way Ilya had

looked with Shane's fingers in his mouth, and:

"Your mouth," Shane panted. "Fuck, Ilya, your mouth."

Ilya's face broke into a smile more predatory than his usual smirk as he climbed off Shane's body to tug down his pants. Shane's cock sprang free immediately, revealing how into this he clearly was. Ilya's smile became a full grin as he slid down Shane's body and gripped his thighs, looking up at him through hooded eyes.

"You are lucky man," Ilya murmured. Shane could feel the words ghosting along his cock, which twitched. He couldn't believe he was finally about to know what this felt like. The whole thing seemed surreal, but any thought he might have had of saying no—and truthfully he'd never had one—had been left behind before the photoshoot even started that day.

"Ilya," he gasped.

"You want to know why you are lucky man?" Ilya was still looking up at him, unmoving, and despite their positions he didn't doubt for a second who held the power right now. He shuddered at the knowledge of it.

"I thought it was because you were going to suck my dick, but maybe I was wrong," Shane huffed. Ilya slowly licked a stripe up Shane's cock, and he almost yelled. His hips bucked, but Ilya's firm hands held him in place on the bed as he sucked lightly at the head and Shane's mind started to leave his body. *Fuck* , he'd never felt anything like that. He'd never even imagined anything like that. Women had given him blow jobs, sure, but…He had the confusing thought that he didn't know why it would be any different with a man, unless it was somehow different because it was Ilya. He pumped the brakes on that train of thought real quick.

"You are lucky man," Ilya said, kissing down Shane's length to nuzzle at his balls, taking one gently into his mouth and sending Shane shooting terrifyingly close to the edge already. "To have first time with someone who is so good at sex."

"You're such an assho—"

Ilya pressed a finger to the pucker of Shane's rim while he swallowed the full length of Shane's cock, and nothing else Shane said for the next several minutes resembled words. When he came, it was into the wet heat of Ilya's mouth, with a spit-slick finger pressed inside him,

and full of the sinking feeling that he was never going to be able to get enough of this.

He was still shuddering through the aftershocks when Ilya sat up and pulled his pants down quickly, freeing his straining cock and starting to stroke. Shane stared, mesmerized, at the size of it, at the way the wet head peeked through Ilya's fist with every jerk of his hand, and all he could think was that he couldn't believe he hadn't gotten to see it until now. Well, almost all he could think. The other thought was an overwhelming need to know, this first time with a man, what a cock felt like in his mouth. *That* cock, specifically.

It was his turn to reach out and catch Ilya's wrist. Ilya looked at him in surprise, and then his face flashed with concern and something maybe like…self-consciousness? Shane could see him start to cave in, close down, like he thought Shane wanted him to stop. It was the opposite of what he wanted.

"Don't hide," he said, repeating Ilya's mantra back to him. He shuffled quickly to his knees, and then down to all fours, putting his mouth where he wanted to be, showing Ilya how ready he was. "Please, I want—" and then he guided Ilya's cock to his lips. He tried to memorize every sensation: the taste of Ilya's precome, the way the girth pressed on his tongue, the way the muscles in his cheeks and jaw moved as he stretched his lips to accommodate this visitor into his body. He already never wanted him to leave.

He did his best to imitate the technique Ilya had used, sucking on the head and tonguing at the slit. He was rewarded with a burst of precome and Ilya's hands tangled in his hair. He knew it couldn't be a good blowjob, but Ilya was muttering in Russian and starting to thrust gently, so he hoped it wasn't a bad one, either.

"Shane," Ilya gasped after just a couple of minutes. "Shane, I—" and then he pulled back from Shane's mouth abruptly and shot his load all over Shane's chest.

Shane sat back, chest heaving like he'd run a mile, lips tingling, and he watched Ilya Rozanov's come slide down between his pecs and something fundamental in him shifted into place like the last piece of a puzzle. He'd done that. He'd made Ilya feel this good, just with his own body and his own willingness and *wow.* Sex with a woman had never felt that way and he'd wondered if sex with *anyone* could ever be this good and—

Shane dragged his eyes up to find llya's, terrified that he'd see mocking or cruelty or dismissal, but Ilya was smiling down at him, eyes dancing, his usual smirk curled through with carnal pleasure. "Okay," Shane said, because *wow* felt too exposed and *thank you* would absolutely get him laughed at.

Ilya reached out and grabbed both sides of Shane's face, and he did kiss him then, laughing into it so it was clumsy and damp, somehow nothing like either of their previous two kisses. Instead of tentative or fiery, this one was…fun.

Shane's lips still vibrated from being stretched around Ilya's cock when Ilya pulled back. "There," Ilya said, still holding Shane's face like he thought his head might fall off. "Now you know." He was all his usual Ilya smugness, but Shane found he didn't really care, right in that moment, because Ilya was right: now he knew, and it was fucking amazing.

Two hours later, they were both settled in their beds with the lights off, the room quiet, and Shane stared over at what he could make out of the generic hotel painting hanging on the wall. The exhilaration of earlier had faded into something that was akin to panic, but without the pressing need to run.

Shane had accepted, months ago, that he wasn't entirely straight. Or, really, straight at all. His attempts at relationships with women had been lackluster at best, his sexual encounters disappointing, presumably for both of them. He'd almost wondered if he just didn't have that kind of heat inside him—until he'd started letting himself look at men without forcing himself to ignore how it made him feel.

But of course Ilya Rozanov had to make it fucking *complicated,* because the roaring bonfire that had just been set ablaze was consuming all the oxygen in the room. It had to be simply because Ilya was the only man he'd been allowed to touch like that, the only one to touch him back, the only one to look at him with something like desire in his eyes. For Ilya this had just been some fun, maybe a way to tease Shane, maybe a way to alleviate some of the guilt he clearly felt for drawing Shane into this whole marriage nightmare.

But for Shane it was something else. Something he didn't want to name. Something that scared him a lot.

December, 2011 – New York, NY

“I liked your CCM shoot.” The words came from Shane’s left as he exited the visitor locker room and he couldn’t help but roll his eyes in frustration. He felt like he had heard just about every permutation of those words on loop—although often with an edge of meanness that this mild voice didn’t have—ever since CCM had put a few teaser shots online. Tonight, after a grueling, grating loss to the New York Admirals, he didn’t want to deal with it.

“Look,” he said, and then abruptly stopped. The person talking to him was Scott Hunter. “Hunter.” Shane finished lamely, realizing that he’d never had a proper conversation with the man who was basically his hero. Hunter seemed to sense his discomfort and smiled warmly. Fuck, he was handsome.

“Kip is demanding a redo, you know,” Hunter said, smiling wider. “He says you showed us up.”

Shane offered him a small smile in return at that, remembering how that edge of competition had helped him overcome some of his… hesitation. He had to admit, the photos were hot as hell. The photographer had certainly managed to capture the passion that Ilya had poured into the kiss and probably a little too much of the desperation Shane had given back. He'd only glanced through the shots attached to the post, his anxiety not letting him ignore them but also not letting him examine them any closer. But he couldn't look at them—or the clothing package that had arrived at his door a week later—without thinking about what happened in their hotel room right after.

Despite how awkward it was, he was strangely proud to have it out there in the world that a man like Ilya kissed Shane like *that,* but it was also why he’d gotten neverending shit for it. “We got a little competitive,” he said, and Hunter laughed.

A couple of his teammates straggled out of the locker room behind him. One of them snorted, and another said, *"Have fun,"* in a jeering way that made Shane frown. Sure they’d lost tonight, but a player like Hunter surely accorded more respect than that. Any player should, but…Hunter frowned too, and the players scuttled away.

“Walk with me?” Hunter asked. Shane just nodded. Hunter could be leading him into an alley to murder him, and he’d probably just follow.

Hayden came out of the locker room and looked from Shane to Hunter

inquisitively. “You coming?”

“I’ll catch up,” Shane said, an easy lie that Hayden would know was a lie. He’d thought that maybe his team’s recent iciness towards him would thaw as they got used to the idea of his marriage to Ilya, but at least for some of them it only seemed to be solidifying. These days, Shane couldn’t really endure going out with them unless it was after a win. “Text me where you go,” he said anyway. Hayden nodded and walked towards the reporters around the corner, pulling on his suit jacket as he went.

Shane and Hunter went the other way, out of a side door. That was the first sign that really made Shane worry. A player like Hunter, who’d scored the winning goal tonight and also spent a fair bit of time in the penalty box, would be expected to do a lot of press. What did he have to talk to Shane about so urgently?

“Sorry for the cloak and dagger routine,” Hunter said, as they turned and headed towards the water, before turning them south. Shane could see the Empire State Building like a beacon. He was momentarily worried that they’d stand out in their suits, but it took more than that to get a second look on a Friday night in Manhattan. “I’ve been wanting to talk to you for a while now, actually.”

“I appreciated your card,” Shane said honestly. Hunter had clearly gotten his accurate contact info through whatever channels he had and sent Shane a very nice congratulations card. Ilya had gotten one too and laughed about it, like, a lot, because apparently sending traditional greeting cards was a boring thing to do. Shane left that part out.

“It was hardly enough,” Hunter said, hunching his shoulders against the cold breeze. “And this conversation won’t be either, because I’ve got to ask you, Hollander: are things okay for you on the Voyageurs?”

Shane stopped walking in surprise. “What?”

“How have they been about you being gay?”

“Um.” How had they been? He supposed it was kind of hard to say, since he’d only been out for a few hours before the news about Ilya had broken and everything went to shit, but the initial reception had been fine. That first practice had been fine. Right? “Fine?”

Hunter was quiet for a block. When they got to the next crosswalk, he began again. “Did you know after I came out, three of my teammates

asked for trades?" Shane hadn't known that. People moved around all the time for all sorts of reasons, so it wouldn't necessarily have been talked about. He supposed he wasn't surprised, but ouch. "There were others who were uncomfortable, too. Lots of 'what about the locker room' kinds of things, you know how it is."

Did he? Whatever conversations had been happening, Shane wasn't sure he'd been a part of them.

"The point is," Hunter said, "The Admirals have come a long way, but it's taken work. *Active work,* to address it. Open conversations. Acknowledgement that we're learning a different way to do things. Building something different. I don't blame anyone for it being hard. Hockey and homophobia go hand in hand."

Shane didn't know where this was going, but he was starting to have a sinking feeling about it. Hunter stopped walking and looked down to meet Shane's eye. "Is Montreal doing the work, Shane?"

Shane had the strangest feeling like he was about to cry, and looked away, clearing his throat. "I think they're still getting used to it," he deflected. He was still grappling with the concept that the Admirals had apparently taken an approach that involved talking about it instead of pretending like it wasn't happening. But Shane's situation—married to a bitter rival—was different. "They tease me a little, sometimes, but nothing bad or anything. Rainbow glitter in my bag, that kind of thing. They're just being funny." He didn't mention their coldness about Ilya specifically, since that hadn't been Hunter's question.

The corners of Hunter's mouth tightened. "Do *you* think it's funny?"

No, Shane hadn't. It had taken him hours to try to get the glitter out of everything. But there was a learning curve. On the other hand, a learning curve implied that learning was going on.

"They're pissed about Ilya," he conceded. "They were cool with me coming out, but being married to a player everyone hates…it's still a problem for them."

Hunter hummed noncommittally. "My concern is," he said, "when Laurent got in my face tonight and said some things that were homophobic enough that I actually hadn't heard them before, I don't think that had anything to do with Rozanov."

"What?" Hunter had gotten a penalty in the second period for, well,

breaking Laurent's nose. Laurent wasn't on Shane's line, so he hadn't heard what had happened. He was kind of an asshole in general, though; it wasn't the first time someone had lost it at him, so Shane hadn't thought much of it.

"Yeah." Hunter sounded grim. "And I just started to get worried about a young, gay player like you being on a team where that's tolerated. I hope you'll forgive me for being a little protective of you."

They'd stopped in front of a pub now, and the warm light fell across Hunter's features as he leaned against the wall and looked at Shane. He looked sad. Shane honestly had no idea what to say. "Glad you broke his nose then," he settled on, and Hunter laughed.

"Yeah, me too. Maybe he'll think twice now while his learning catches up to the times."

Shane exhaled shakily. That was it. It had all happened so fast. People just needed time to catch up. He just had to wait it out and they'd all adjust, like Hayden and J.J. had.

"Do you want to come in?" Hunter asked, angling his head up at the pub sign. *The Kingfisher,* it was called. Shane gaped, both because they'd walked all the way to The Village, and because he knew the place.

"Oh! This is the…I remember, from your spread in Esquire…" He trailed off, hoping that the darkness concealed his flaming cheeks. Which was more embarrassing, admitting that he'd read Hunter's spread in a decidedly non-sports publication, or that he couldn't even say the words *gay bar*? "I should get back to my hotel. I'll just—" He got his phone out and held it up like an idiot as if that was the universal sign for calling a car service, but Hunter seemed to get the point.

"Well, next time you're in town, you're welcome here anytime. Rozanov too."

"Really?" Shane couldn't help but laugh at the thought of Ilya's face if he told him Scott Hunter had invited him to his gay bar.

"Yeah, really. I figure he must be worth getting to know, if you married him."

Fuck. Hunter really was as nice as they made fun of him for being.

“Thanks,” Shane managed to say.

“And Hollander.” Hunter paused in the open doorway. “If you ever want to request a trade, there’s an alternate Captain jersey in New York with your name on it.”

“*Alternate* Captain.” Shane grinned.

“Yeah.” Hunter grinned back. “I’m not going anywhere.”

I’m not going anywhere. As Shane waited for the car service, he wondered for the first time if maybe he should.

Chapter 7: The Holidays

"You still need to work on getting through traffic in the crease. Has Coach been making you practice with defense? Laurent, or Archer?"

"Yes, mom. Of course. I'm working on it."

"Alright." Yuna let out what Shane had come to think of as her 'hockey sigh,' as if she had to expel hockey from her lungs before she could move on to other topics. "So you fly back on Thursday. When are you and Ilya heading over?"

"What?"

"For Christmas."

Shane opened his mouth then closed it again. *Oh shit.* He had completely forgotten about Ilya and Christmas. Thanksgiving had been too chaotic for both their schedules, and Shane hadn't even seen his parents, but there was no such excuse for the Christmas break, and Shane really wanted to go home. "Uh. Oh. Damn, Ro—Ilya and I haven't even talked about Christmas. I can't believe it's December already."

"Well, talk to him and let me know when you're going to be here. It'll be so nice to have a meal with Ilya. I feel like we hardly know him."

On purpose, Shane didn't say. "Sure. I'll talk to him." His mom hadn't even bothered to blunt the accusatory edge to her words, and he barely restrained himself from a groan. It was hard enough having the majority of his team mad at him without remembering the hurt look on his parents' faces when they'd found out about Shane's life-changing commitment from the internet. And that was without the Ilya Rozanov rivalry issue.

Shane managed to get his mom onto another topic and made the appropriate hums and "no ways" while trying to come up with a decent reason why he and his husband wouldn't be together at Christmas. As soon as he hung up with Yuna, Shane called Ilya.

"Hollander. If you are calling me for hockey advice, I do not think I can fix it all over the phone."

"Shut up. I'm calling about Christmas."

"What about it?"

"You're going to Russia for the break, right?"

"No. Is not long enough to make the flight worth it." There was an undercurrent to his words that suggested there was more to that, but Shane didn't press.

"Ah, well. Mom wants you to come over to our place for it. Do you have plans?"

"No. I hadn't thought about it."

"Ah." Shane sighed and tipped backwards onto his couch.

"Is fine. I will stay home, and you will tell your family that I have gone to Russia."

But for some reason that wasn't the relief that Shane had expected it to be. It was too sad, thinking about Ilya sitting at home all by himself while Shane had dinner with his family, surrounded by good food, cozy smells, and holiday movies. "Do you…want to come over?" Shane tried.

There was a pointed pause. "Are you inviting me, or is Yuna Hollander inviting me?"

"I guess…both of us? I mean if you don't want to, that's fine. But I know you have no family here, and my mom likes to feed people, especially hockey players."

"I think not so much *this* hockey player," Ilya said with a laugh.

Shane laughed too. "I think you might be growing on her, now that she's over the shock. Besides, she's always been a Cens fan. She wants you to come."

Ilya was quiet again, then, "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yes. I know it is hard for you to be away from me for so long, so I will come."

Shane snorted. "I'm so blessed," he said sarcastically. "Bring my dad, like, anything to do with birdwatching. Maybe a new pair of binoculars? And get my mom a signed Hayes jersey."

"Ouch."

"And we can just tell them that we're going to exchange gifts on our own, and they won't think that's weird. We do dinner on Christmas Eve, so I'll drive to Ottawa in the morning that day and we can go over together in the afternoon. We'll stay over and do Christmas morning and then you're free to head back. I'll probably stay until Boxing Day."

"You should stay until New Years and come party with the Cens."

"I don't know, Rozanov, last time I went to a big party with you, we ended up married."

Ilya laughed. "Best day of your life, no?"

"Actually, that was the day I beat you out for the Junior Worlds gold."

"Almost same day."

"And yet, with a crucial difference. So I'll pick you up on Christmas Eve?"

"Yes, okay. Sounds good."

"Okay, see you then." Shane hung up, not really entirely sure what had just happened.

December, 2011 – Ottawa, ON

I'm here.

Shane put his car in park in front of Ilya's building and sent the text. He watched the door for Ilya's arrival. He was nervous, but he wasn't sure what he was nervous about, exactly. Or rather, he was nervous about too many things to pin it down into a comprehensive list.

He wasn't sure if he wanted his parents to like Ilya or not. If they didn't, they'd worry about him while they were married, and if they did, they'd worry about him after the divorce. He also wasn't sure why he was feeling so invested in Ilya having a nice time; maybe it was because he'd been the one to push Ilya to come even though there was a perfectly fine excuse he could have used for why he hadn't.

Ilya pushed out of the front doors in a perfectly tailored black peacoat

and a Cens toque, his curls peeking out around the hem. He had a duffle bag and a backpack, and one hand in his pocket. He looked like a movie star, as usual.

Shane rolled down his window enough to wave, and Ilya nodded and sauntered over. He threw his bags in the back and climbed in the passenger seat. "You are millionaire now, no?"

"Uh. Hello. And yes?"

"Just making sure. Thought maybe since you still drive this car, the NHL had forgotten to pay you."

"Fuck off." Shane pulled out of the parking lot and turned towards his parents' house. "And how many cars have you bought? I don't think I've ever seen you drive the same one twice."

"Not enough, yet," Ilya said, catching Shane's eye and winking.

Conversation shifted to hockey, breaking down the Bears-Guardians faceoffs into their every detail and dissecting Florida's Power Play. Before Shane knew it, they were pulling into his parents' driveway. Ilya peered out the window. "Did you buy them a new house when you signed?"

"No, this is where I grew up. I keep trying to pay for upgrades, but they won't let me."

"You grew up here? Can I see tiny Hollander's bedroom?"

"Thankfully, no, they turned it into a home office. But I don't think you would have been surprised to see it was entirely about hockey."

"Cens wallpaper?"

Shane blushed. "Maybe."

"Sad I missed it."

Shane parked and got out, grabbing his bags, and headed for the house, Ilya in tow. The door opened before they made it up the porch, and Yuna grabbed Shane and pulled him into a hug. "Hi, mom."

Yuna turned to look at Ilya, who actually looked nervous for the first time Shane had ever seen. He wondered if it was a put-on for the in-laws or if he really was. "Hello, Ilya. Welcome."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hollander. Thank you for inviting me."

"Of course. And it's Yuna, please. Merry Christmas." Yuna hugged Ilya, then ushered them both inside. "Take your stuff up and then come down and tell me all about your seasons so far." It was an adorable thing for her to say, considering that she could probably tell them more about their own seasons than they could.

Shane checked that Ilya was following him, then climbed up the stairs, past the room that used to be his and was now an office and to the guest room that Yuna had decorated with hockey paraphernalia. Most of it was the Centaurs, but there was a framed picture of the Voyageurs from Shane's rookie year and a shelf of Shane's trophies.

As he remembered, the bed was a queen, and there was only one.

"Would they have let us share a room if we were not married yet?" Ilya asked, smiling at the wall of trophies.

"Yeah, I think so." Shane dropped his bag on the door side of the bed. "They're pretty pragmatic."

"Have you brought anyone home for the holiday before?"

"Nope. Just you."

"I am so honoured." Ilya spread his hand over his chest. He turned and considered the bed. "Nice and cozy."

Shane sighed. "Well, I couldn't very well tell them I needed an air mattress."

"Is okay. I am sure we can make *very* good use of this one." He smoldered, in that way he had that made Shane feel like all his clothes were too tight, then dropped his bag by the window and all but skipped out of the room and down the stairs.

"Fucker," Shane huffed, then scrambled after him.

Dinner went pretty much as Shane had expected. Yuna grilled them both about hockey, and Shane wasn't surprised that Ilya held his own against her. They got so deep into a conversation about delayed penalties that Shane had to elbow Yuna and remind her to actually eat something.

Shane couldn't help a little bit of pride at bringing home someone his

parents liked, even if they'd been sure they wouldn't like him at first. It didn't really matter that it was fake; it still felt good to watch his family get along with his partner. It gave Shane hope that someday he'd bring home someone for real and his parents would love him just as much.

Probably more, because he wouldn't also be Ilya Rozanov and true rivalries died hard.

After dinner, Shane and Ilya did the dishes, which resulted in both of them needing to change their shirts due to splashing violations.

"Shall we watch The Grinch?" David suggested, once they were all settled on the couch.

"Have you seen it?" Shane asked Ilya, and he shook his head.

Yuna agreed that it wasn't Christmas without roast beast, and opened the blanket chest under the window to dig out a few afghans to keep the winter chill away. The one she tossed to Shane and Ilya had a huge centaur playing hockey on it.

"Mom!" Shane protested. "I sent you a Voyageurs one."

She had the dignity to blush a little. "Ilya's our guest, so we use his blanket."

"That's BS." Shane shook it out and spread it over their laps. "I bet the Montreal one is shoved to the bottom."

She shrugged, and settled down next to David, picking up her mug of tea. "The Montreal colours don't suit the living room as well. I'm cheering for you, though, honey!"

"That's also BS," Shane muttered at Ilya who grinned. Shane found the remote between the couch cushions and scrolled through the sea of streaming apps until he found The Grinch. He pressed play, then popped open the menu to turn the closed captioning on for Ilya. He tossed the remote on the coffee table, then settled back, shooting Ilya a look to make sure he had everything he needed, but he was looking at Shane, a soft smile curling his lips.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Shane nodded, oddly flustered by Ilya's earnestness, and turned back to the movie.

Two movies, a bowl of popcorn, and a mug of hot chocolate later, Shane caught Ilya yawning and figured he was waiting for Shane to end the night, so he stood and bent to kiss his mother's cheek. "I think we'll turn in. Thanks for dinner, guys."

"Goodnight, honey. Sleep well."

Ilya shook David's hand and gave Yuna a hug, then followed Shane to the stairs. Upstairs, Shane rustled around in his bag looking for his toothpaste. Ilya sat on the end of the bed and watched him.

"I could wait until they go to bed," Shane said. "They won't be up long, and then I can go sleep on the couch."

Ilya laughed. "You are so cute, Shane Hollander. I have had your dick in my mouth. I think I can sleep beside you one night." He winked.

But Shane didn't really need a reminder of the exact reason why he didn't want to share a bed with Ilya. It was too weird being around him, knowing what his precome tasted like while playing out this ridiculous charade in front of everyone. As always, Ilya was infuriatingly comfortable with everything. He brushed his teeth, peeled down to his boxers, then climbed into the bed, eyes glued to his phone.

Shane played out his own routine, though he opted for red plaid pajama pants and a t-shirt. He lifted a corner of the blanket and slid in next to Ilya, trying to leave as much space as possible in a queen bed occupied by two professional hockey players.

Ilya chuckled at his phone. "Harris makes good twitter posts." He tilted his phone to show Shane A picture of Chiron the dog chasing Ilya across the ice, holding a hockey stick, with the caption: *Watch out @shanehollanderhockeyplayer you've got competition!*

"You really like him," Shane observed, making a mental note to comment on the post next time he had his phone out.

"He is a nice guy. Very friendly. Easy to talk to."

Shane wondered, not for the first time, what Ilya would do if he met someone he was genuinely interested in. As far as Shane could tell, Ilya didn't do relationships, just sex, but that didn't mean someone couldn't come along who would truly turn his head. But Ilya had promised he wouldn't do anything that would look to the public like cheating as long as they were together, and Shane trusted him. That

was one thing when Ilya was only missing out on sex, though. But what if he missed out on love? "He seems great."

Ilya grinned. "Are you jealous?"

"You wish. Maybe Harris will take you off my hands, sometimes."

Ilya hummed. "I have never had a complaint about my hands before." He did that flirty, sparkling eyes thing at Shane, who tried not to react in any obvious way. He really *didn't* have any complaints about Ilya's hands, but thinking about how they'd felt on his cock, how his finger had slipped inside Shane's body, was not helping with the stuck-together-in-a-small-bed situation.

Shane cleared his throat. "Do you miss it?"

"Miss what?" Ilya tossed his phone on the bedside table, and clicked the light off, leaving them in the glow from the little clock under the lamp. Ilya rolled over and hooked Shane's waist, dragging him up against his bare chest.

Shane squeaked. "What are you doing?!" he hissed. "My parents are in the next room."

Ilya laughed, low and dark. "You have a dirty mind. This is the only way we will both fit here." Shane couldn't bring himself to dispute this, despite it being demonstrably untrue, because it was a cute lie. "Besides, you need to relax, Hollander. So tense." He squeezed Shane's shoulder.

Shane was anything *but* relaxed. "I don't need your help to relax," Shane gasped out. But then Ilya's fingers found the back of his neck and they dug in hard. The tight muscles at the base of Shane's skull gave under the pressure, releasing all the way down his back.

"Oh, shit," Shane groaned then shoved his face in Ilya's chest to muffle the sound. He really hoped his parents hadn't come upstairs for bed yet.

Ilya laughed softly. "So tense."

Shane shifted back a little, pressing against Ilya's hand, and when Ilya immediately gave in, releasing him, Shane realized he'd just needed to know, just needed to test. He didn't actually want to pull away. If they could manage to have sex once to keep each other sane during this whole, crazy thing, surely they could…cuddle? It wasn't that weird.

Heck, half the guys in the league had fallen asleep snuggled up on the bench with a teammate between practice and the game. As Ilya had said, they'd had each other's dicks in their mouths—this wasn't weirder.

It kind of was, though.

Shane settled back down against Ilya's side, and Ilya curled around him again, tugging him even closer.

"Miss what?" Ilya repeated.

"Miss…" Shane tried to think of a tactful way to ask then remembered Ilya had never been tactful in his life. "Sleeping around. Dating. Hooking up. All that stuff."

"Yes," Ilya said bluntly.

"Oh." Shane wasn't sure why that felt like the wrong answer. He wasn't sure he would have believed *no* anyway. He'd barely had sex and he was still regularly frustrated that he couldn't easily get more of it, especially now that he'd figured out that what made it worthwhile was having it with men.

Well, the data actually only confirmed that it was *Ilya,* but it was impossible to only enjoy having sex with one person on the whole planet, right?

Thinking about sex, and Ilya and sex, while Ilya's bare chest was firm and warm under him had Shane's body reacting unfortunately, and he shifted around so his inevitable boner wouldn't dig into Ilya's hip. There'd be no end to the mocking if that happened. Unless, of course, that was what Ilya was angling for after all.

"Is worth it, though," Ilya continued.

"What?"

"No sex is worth it to play hockey. Here. In Canada." He kept massaging Shane's neck idly, like it was something his hand did on its own. Shane wondered if this was the kind of thing Ilya normally did after one of his hookups or if Ilya was the type to get dressed and leave right after.

Shane was opening his mouth to say something about how them being married didn't *necessarily* have to mean no sex—because now he was

half-hard and last time had been so good, and he still had so many questions, so many things he wanted to try—when Ilya snuggled down a little deeper and let out a sigh that hit Shane's cheek.

"You should sleep, Hollander. If you do not sleep, I hear Santa will not come."

Shane laughed softly and breathed out the last of his tension. It was warm and Ilya smelled like his spicy cologne and David's mulled apple cider. His long, clever fingers gently worked the knots out of Shane's neck, and the simmer of Shane's arousal cooled into the warm relaxation that apparently came from having Ilya in his family home. The thought sparked a different kind of wakefulness in him, and he tried to focus on Ilya's breathing. He thought about his parents sleeping peacefully next door, and the way the familiar sounds of the house held all of them. *Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse,* he thought a little ludicrously. But–

"Thank you," Ilya murmured, though his hands had long stilled, and Shane thought he'd fallen asleep. Now that they were alone, Shane could ask him what he meant.

"For what?" Shane whispered back.

"Bringing me here."

Shane couldn't help asking himself if Ilya would ever touch him when he didn't feel like he owed him something. Shane knew it wasn't something he *should* want, but he couldn't lie anymore and pretend it was something he *didn't* want. He just didn't know why.

But that was a problem for future Shane. Present Shane just pressed his nose against Ilya's chest and admitted, "I'm glad you came."

Chapter 8: The Gift

Shane woke up sweaty, confused, and completely unable to move. He had 200 pounds of professional hockey player sprawled out on top of him. "Ilya."

"Is holiday," Ilya muttered. "Sleep in."

Shane laughed. "I can't *breathe."*

"But so comfortable."

Shane dug his fingers into Ilya's ribs on both sides and sent him yelping to the other side of the bed.

"Fuck you, Hollander."

"I'm going for a run. You should come." He tugged on Ilya's hair.

"You are crazy. What about Christmas things?"

"My parents won't be up for another hour. We'll do presents then."

"Then I will see you in one hour." Ilya scooted into Shane's warm spot and smushed his face into the pillow.

Shane hopped out of bed and got changed. He flushed as he tugged his pajama pants off and pulled his shorts on, wondering if Ilya was peeking out of the pillow to catch a glimpse of him, then laced up his sneakers and trotted out into the early morning chill. He didn't want to push his run too long, just enjoy getting warmed up for the day and shake off whatever last night had been.

Shane had to admit to himself that he'd expected Ilya to start something like what had happened in Toronto. They were stuck sharing a bed, Ilya half-naked as he always seemed to sleep, and there was no doubt he was horny after several months with only his hand for company. But instead he'd just…held Shane. And gone to sleep.

What if it was because Shane hadn't been good last time? Had his blowjob been so bad that Ilya would rather have no sex than sex with Shane? He'd come, so could it really have been *that* bad? Unless he actually cared that Shane's parents were in the house. That seemed out of character.

Shane was so caught up in his thoughts that he didn't notice how far he'd gone until he was several blocks further away than he'd planned. He had to run full out to get back before David would send out a search party.

Everyone was up, even Ilya, who was in the living room, arguing with Yuna about whether Boston was giving their newest rookie enough ice time.

"Morning, sweetheart," he said, when Shane kicked his shoes off and came inside. "How was your run?"

Shane let Ilya kiss his cheek. "Good. You should have come."

"Go shower, honey," Yuna told him. "We'll do presents and then waffles."

Twenty minutes later, Shane was damp and clean, squished up on the loveseat with Ilya while his parents handed out presents.

Shane had gotten his parents a new dishwasher, despite their protests, and it wouldn't be delivered until the new year, so he had some chocolates and wine he'd picked up on his last roadie for them to open.

Ilya had come through with the binoculars for David and the Hayes jersey for Yuna who was delighted. The parents had a bunch of little things for Ilya and Shane, some clothes, some candy, and—hilariously—monogrammed towels, despite them not living together.

Shane was about to rock up out of his seat when Ilya put a hand on his leg, settling him back down. Ilya leaned forward and plucked a small box out of the branches of the tree where it'd been hidden. "Here." He handed the box to Shane.

"I thought we were doing presents later."

Ilya winked. "We can do other presents later, sweetheart. I think you would want this now."

Shane gave him a look. "Rozanov…"

Ilya elbowed him, laughing. "Open it, Hollander."

Shane peeled the tape off the box and levered it open. Inside were two rings. They were smooth and flexible-looking; silicone, Shane thought.

He'd seen other athletes and people who worked with their hands wearing something similar, sometimes. Those were usually black or grey, though. These were red and blue—such an exact match for Centaurs red and Voyageurs blue for them to be anything other than custom. Which meant Ilya had put a lot of thought and effort into this.

"You said the metal one was bothering you. I hear this is better. One for you. One for me." Ilya held out his hand like they were getting married all over again.

"Oh." Shane stared at the rings for an embarrassingly long amount of time before realizing everyone was watching him, waiting. "Right." He took Ilya's ring from the box and slid it on his finger for him, then grabbed his own and put it on before Ilya could reciprocate. It fit perfectly.

Shane had never managed to really get comfortable with the metal one. It pinched if he forgot to take it off before skating and it got caught in his hair while he showered. He'd taken to leaving it in his hockey bag and only pulling it out for press conferences. And somehow, Ilya had known, had thought about it, had decided to fix it. Shane realized with a start that the custom colours must have meant he ordered them before he even knew he was spending Christmas at Shane's parents' house. Had he been planning to celebrate just the two of them?

"Those are lovely," Yuna said. "What are they made of?"

"Silicone," Shane said. "The metal ones dug in and got scratched. I was always worried I was going to break it. Ended up hardly wearing it."

"Well, you should keep the original ones, too," David said.

Shane thought about the hair tie tucked in the change pocket of his wallet and nodded. He'd keep the original. There was something expectant in the air, so Shane twisted around and kissed Ilya square on the lips, grinning at the surprised look on Ilya's face. When he looked back over at his parents, Yuna had her phone pointed at them.

"Mom."

"What? You guys are too cute. And all the pictures I have of you two are from press conferences." She tutted.

Shane cuddled up to Ilya and let her take a few more before shooing her phone away.

"Well," David said, clapping his hands. "About time for breakfast."

"Come help me bring the waffle maker in from the garage," Yuna said, tapping Shane on the knee as she stepped past.

"Sure, mom." Shane stood, and Ilya moved to get up with him, but Yuna waved him back down.

"No, you relax, Ilya. Shane can help me."

"If you are sure." Ilya reached up and gave Shane a little pat on the hip, like he was scooting him back off the ice after a warmup, and Shane barely resisted the urge to roll his eyes, tamping down his smile.

Outside, the fresh snow had blanketed everything in cool white, the backyard a sea of glittering diamonds in the bright sun. Shane shuffled ahead of his mom, clearing a path to the garage. They kept a shovel leaning against the garage wall, so Shane tossed some of the snow away from the front of the side door and tugged it open.

Half the garage was for sports and half the garage was for cooking. Shane laughed at the collection of hockey sticks his mom had saved, piled up against one wall. "Wow, I can't believe I was ever this short." He tugged out one of the mini ones and leaned it against his hip.

Yuna sighed. "You were so cute in your little pads, falling over every time you tried to stop."

Shane snorted. "If Ilya were here, he'd say, 'well it seems like nothing has changed then.'"

Yuna smiled knowingly. "You know, I was worried about him at first."

"I know, mom."

"I thought, you know, he seemed so much older than you, even though he isn't, and you two playing against each other was always hyped up so much, even when you were babies in Juniors."

Shane shook his head with a smile at the thought that they'd been babies in Juniors.

"I was worried, I don't know. That he was taking advantage of you, or had pushed you into something you didn't want to do. Or maybe that…well, you felt like you had to hide this part of you, honey, and I

thought what if you were just interested in him because he was interested in you, you know?"

"You were worried that we only got together cause we're the only two single guys in the NHL who like men?"

"It crossed my mind." She crossed her arms as well, in punctuation.

"I could have dated someone who wasn't a hockey player," Shane offered. "That would have been simpler."

"Well, it doesn't matter now anyway."

"Why not?"

"Because I can see how much you two really love each other. Ilya comes on strong, he has a lot to protect, I think, but when he lets his guard down, I can tell he's totally gone for you, honey. I wish you'd felt like you could tell us, both about your sexuality and about Ilya, but I'm glad it's all worked out. I know it's hard having a relationship and a job like yours, and there are no guarantees in life or in love, but I'm so happy for you. And so proud of you."

"Oh, mom…" Shane's eyes heated, and he reached out and drew his mom into a hug. His heart ached with the desire to spill the truth while his mind raced at her words. *I can tell he's totally gone for you.* Ilya was a good actor, had been good at this since their first day pretending, but convincing Yuna Hollander was pretty damned impressive. Shane started to wonder, maybe, if Ilya actually did like him. Not love him, obviously, but especially after last night it seemed like they had a real shot at being something like friends, which would make all of this so much easier. To his surprise, Shane wanted that. He wanted to be friends with Ilya. "I love you," Shane squeezed Yuna tight.

"I love you, too. Now. Up you get. The box is on the top shelf."

After breakfast, Shane couldn't stop thinking about the piles of sticks, pucks, and old skates in the garage, so he bumped Ilya with his elbow. "Hey. There's this spot on the edge of the woods that a couple of the families in the neighbourhood would always flood a rink. Do you want to go play?"

Ilya brightened immediately. "I will take any opportunity to kick your ass, Hollander."

"No chance. This is my turf."

Ilya had brought his skates, so they layered up like they did for practice—Ilya looking devastating in his CCM Pride gear from the shoot—then dug sticks and pucks and a shovel out of the garage. The walk to the rink was heavy with snow, and Shane hoped they wouldn't get there and find no one had built it this year, but sure enough, their path ended at a wooden frame and a log bench. It took a while clearing the snow off the ice, but underneath it was gorgeous, glistening in the sun. It was a bit rough, but not too bad, so Shane assumed someone had to be taking good care of it this year. Two small nets were piled next to the bench, and they slid them into place.

They sat side-by-side on the logs and laced up.

"I am trying to decide how much I can teach you about stick handling before you cry," Ilya offered cheerfully.

"I think you'll be a bit busy watching the puck go in your net over and over," Shane shot back.

They hopped up on the ice and warmed up a little, stretching out and getting their sea legs on the rocky, outdoor surface. It had been a while, Shane presumed, since either of them had skated on anything that had never been kissed by a zamboni. The rink was small, but that was all for the best with one-on-one.

There was no ‘going easy’ or ‘goofing around’ for Shane and Ilya. As soon as the puck was on the ice, they went hard, whipping out every trickshot and defensive move either had ever practiced. It wasn't long before they were both breathing hard. The rush of pushing on the ice filled Shane with heat from head to toe. *God,* he loved this. And there was nothing like playing against someone who truly challenged him.

This was why he'd risked everything to keep Ilya on Canadian ice, because he couldn't imagine being in a league that didn't have Ilya in it. He couldn't imagine a win feeling like a win if he hadn't snatched it from the tip of Ilya's stick and flicked it past his outstretched hand.

"Yeah!" Shane threw his hands in the air as he took the lead once again.

"Enjoy it while it lasts, Hollander!" Ilya shouted as he circled his own net. They faced off again, then ended up in a tangle against the edge of the rink. Shane realized how much he'd come to rely on the boards, how out of practice he was out here, despite it being the shape of so

much of his childhood.

Ilya got his stick around the puck, but didn't quite have his balance to take off, and Shane smacked his stick out of the way and hooked the puck. He turned and took off for his own corner, just to get clear of Ilya, but as he circled back around, he saw Ilya had cut off in front of Shane's net and was rocketing towards him.

Shane was pretty sure Ilya didn't even try to stop.

They both went flying into the snow bank, screeches turning into laughing as they caught their breath. "That was an illegal check," Shane complained, flopped on his back in the snow.

"Tell it to the ref," Ilya teased back, struggling up to his feet. Shane sat up to watch as Ilya flicked the puck out of the snow and curled around to shoot it into Shane's net. He caught the rebound and popped it in again. "And the crowd is wild!" Ilya threw his stick up and then his gloves. "Team Russia wins again!"

Shane got up and skated over to where Ilya was celebrating, contemplating the best angle to check him back, when he heard a young voice shout, "Shane!" and he turned to see Izzy and Matty trundling along through the snow, arms full of sticks and skates.

"Hey!"

Ilya stopped celebrating. "Neighbours?" he asked.

"Yeah, I used to play a lot of shinny with their older brother, Diego, growing up. But the twins must be…ten? Now. Wow."

Ilya waved, and there was an urgent conference between the twins as they approached. Shane prepared himself for their reaction, because even though Shane Hollander was an NHL superstar, they'd still grown up down the street from him. Ilya Rozanov though…

When the kids arrived at the bench, Shane introduced them. "This is Isabela and Mateo. Kids, this is Ilya. He's uh, my…We play hockey together."

"You play hockey *against* each other," Izzy clarified. "We're big Centaurs fans." She clutched her stick tighter, eyes going wide.

"And you're married," Mateo added. "We didn't know if you were coming home for Christmas, Shane."

"Is Diego here?"

"He's coming this afternoon and staying all week!" Mateo dropped his skates in the snow. "Will you sign our sticks?" he asked Ilya.

"If you score three goals against me," Ilya told them, eyes twinkling.

"Okay!"

The kids laced up their skates, and Shane hung back and let them play two-on-one against Ilya for a while, until they'd scored enough goals that he dutifully signed their sticks. Shane noticed Ilya had suddenly developed a remarkable habit for diving in the wrong direction defending against a well-telegraphed slapshot, but he kept that to himself. When the twins had their fill of playing against Ilya, they split into two teams, Matty and Shane versus Izzy and Ilya, with the pros in the net and the kids facing off.

It was fun to goof around and stop taking it seriously for a while, and Shane noticed twenty minutes in that he'd lost track of the score. After a surprisingly speedy puck to the gut, though, Shane decided to sit out for a bit.

Izzy asked Ilya to show her how to better roll the puck to the tip of her stick, and Matty joined Shane on the bench while they worked on it. Ilya was so good with the kids, joking enough that they felt comfortable, but also great at explaining things. As Shane watched, Izzy lost her edge and almost tumbled down, but Ilya caught her, righting her, his legs spread wide to keep his balance and lower his tall frame closer to her level.

"What's it like being married?" Matty suddenly said out of nowhere, and Shane actually jumped, having forgotten he was there.

He opened his mouth then just hung there, at a loss. He might have expected *what's it like playing NHL hockey,* or even *what's it like knowing Ilya Rozanov,* but not this.

"Uh. It's nice," he said, not wanting to outright lie but also not wanting to confuse or upset the poor kid. "It's nice because we love each other and we respect each other." Shane thought about his parents. "It's like having a best friend but better." He watched Ilya gently guide Izzy's hands as she flipped the puck just right, and he cheered, giving her a high five. "It's pretty great, actually."

"That's nice. I have a best friend but I don't want to marry him." Matty

nodded sagely. "I'm only ten."

"Yeah, you might want to wait a few years."

"I think so."

Then Matty's watch went off. "Izzy, it's lunch!" he called, and she yelped and powered over to the bench-end of the ice.

It took nearly fifteen minutes to get everything signed and get their stuff together and send them off back towards home, and by the time they were traipsing away, through the snow, Shane realized the waffles had been burned off and he was pretty hungry himself. "We should head back too," he told Ilya.

"Alright." Ilya's cheeks were pink and his eyes were bright. He looked so…relaxed. He always *seemed* what a lot of people would call relaxed but Shane had come to realize was actually more like unflappable. Ilya was unwavering on the ice, competitive like Shane, but it manifested a little differently. He came across flippant but the truth was he was confident. And he had every right to be. But Ilya truly relaxed was something else.

Instead of leaving, though, Ilya sat on the bench beside Shane. "Future NHL All Stars, those two."

"They certainly had your number," Shane replied.

"What does that mean..?" His forehead scrunched into his *trying to translate* face.

"Oh, they figured you out. They scored a lot on you. You couldn't beat them."

Ilya laughed. "Oh, definitely."

"You're good with kids."

"I like them. They make sense. They like hockey. They don't care about…other stuff. Yet."

Shane picked at a loose thread on his jeans. "Do you ever think about having kids?"

Ilya shrugged. "It would be nice, sometime. After I retire, maybe. I don't know. You?"

Shane mirrored Ilya's shrug. "My parents want to be grandparents, that's for sure. I'm surprised they haven't said anything to you about it yet, actually. But I'm not sure how good of a dad I'd be. And being…" Shane took a breath, let it out. "Gay. Means it'd be a little harder, maybe."

"At least you are rich and famous," Ilya said with a smile. "Makes everything easier."

"Makes some things easier," Shane countered, "and some things harder." He didn't notice that the fingers of his right hand had started spinning his new wedding ring around and around on his left until Ilya's eyes dropped to track the movement. He stilled. "Do your parents want grandkids?"

Ilya's eyes snapped away to the treeline. "My mother is…gone. And my father will not live long enough to meet a grandchild, if I had one."

"Oh, I'm sorry. When are you going to see him next?"

"I don't—I'm not sure. Maybe never. Going back to Russia is… complicated for me. Now."

"Ah, right. Sorry. I—Sorry."

Ilya chuckled. "Is okay. I want Canada to be my home. That is why I married you." He sparkled at Shane, smiling now. "Family is complicated. I like your family, though."

"Good. They like you." Shane tugged his skates off and swapped for his boots, wincing at the cold air hitting his sweat-dampened socks. "They're going easy on you this time, though. Next year you'll get the third degree, I'm sure."

Ilya gave Shane a strange look, then turned away, packing up his stuff. "We will be divorced by next Christmas, Hollander."

"Oh. Right." Shane didn't know why that was such a sharp disappointment. It wasn't like it was a surprise. He hadn't even wanted Ilya to come along in the first place. But he couldn't deny that it was nice to have someone here, even if it was a fake-husband and only-maybe-friend. He loved Christmas with his parents, but with a partner…it'd been pretty great so far, and the thought of next year showing up as a single divorcé wasn't exactly appealing. Maybe he'd have a new boyfriend by then. Suddenly, he wasn't hungry anymore.

They packed up their stuff in silence and made their way back to the house, stomping through the snow in single file. The sticks and pucks were dropped off at the garage and then they took to the path that led the way across the yard to the house.

Halfway there, Ilya tugged on the back of Shane's hood, and he stopped and turned to glare back at him. Ilya stopped a step too late, which brought him right up against Shane's back, Shane twisted to look up at him, Ilya looming over him, staring down. Ilya's eyes shifted from playful to deep and dark and he dragged his gaze down from Shane's eyes to his mouth.

Was he… was Ilya going to kiss him? There wasn't anyone else around, there was no reason to keep up appearances - unless maybe he'd seen Shane's parents looking out from the window? Still…

Then Ilya smirked again and shoved Shane, sending him sprawling backwards into the snow. "Hey!" Shane struggled back up to his feet and took off after Ilya who was trying and failing to sprint back to the house through the thick snow, cackling like a loon.

Shane launched himself at Ilya's back, but instead of knocking him down, Ilya simply caught him by the legs, and they ended up stumbling the rest of the way back to the side door in an extremely antagonistic piggyback. Ilya dumped Shane on the mudroom mat, and Shane kicked his boots off. "You play dirty," he told Ilya, chest heaving.

Ilya stepped forward, backing Shane against the wall and smoldering at him, his smirk devious enough that Shane genuinely wouldn't have been shocked if Ilya had gone to his knees right there. It flushed heat through Shane that started in his toes and ended with his cold-singed cheeks on fire. "The way I remember, you like it dirty, Hollander." And then he stepped into the house and greeted Yuna in the kitchen, offering to help with lunch.

Shane stayed there for a moment, leaning back against the wall, mind a twisted mess. This crazy, sexy, frustrating, confusing, Russian hockey player was going to be the death of him.

Chapter 9: The All-Star Game

January 2012 - Los Angeles, CA

It was no surprise to anyone when Ilya and Shane were both picked for the All-Star game, and the press enjoyed alternating between playing up their marriage and playing up their rivalry. Shane didn't care about any of that; what he cared about was that he and Ilya were going to be on the same line, playing for the same team for the first time ever. And it didn't matter what all their weird history was, Ilya was a damn good hockey player, and Shane was excited about this chance to be on his side.

The energy in the locker room was more positive than Shane had expected or gotten used to. No one seemed bothered by him and Ilya, no one made muttered comments about gay guys in the locker room, and Ilya's teammates Hayes and Boodrum were on their team too. What contact Shane had had with them had all been positive so far.

Ilya came up and smacked Shane's ass as he was bending over, looking for tape. Shane jumped away. "Jesus, Ilya."

"We should trade jerseys."

"What?"

"I should wear Hollander and you should wear Rozanov. The crowd will love it."

Shane's gut instinct was that they'd get booed off the ice for ‘flaunting their lifestyle,’ but Ilya seemed to have better judgment when it came to this kind of thing. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Is cute. Gimme."

Shane peeled his jersey off and tossed it at Ilya's face. "Okay, fine. But if it's all the press will talk about, you're taking all the questions."

"Press will only want to talk to me anyway. You are very boring." He handed Shane his jersey, then shuffled off back to his own stall.

When they skated out for their warm-up, Shane flinched, wanting to somehow keep his back hidden from the crowd that surrounded them on all sides, but Ilya skated out proudly, waving to the crowd, and the cheer for him was deafening. Shane followed, doing a wide circle, and

Ilya slowed down to skate along with him.

He bumped his stick against Shane's. "We will win." And then he beamed at Shane and winked.

Shane's eyes went up to the center screen, and of course the cameraman had caught that. He sighed and shook his head, smiling indulgently, sure the camera was still tracking his hot, pink cheeks.

They did win. By a lot.

It was electric playing with Ilya. It was like they always knew where the other was and the opposing players might as well have been frozen to the ice for all they mattered. Ilya still joked and chirped, but being on his line, Shane got to see the seriousness underneath, not so different from Shane's in the end. They both burned for this sport to a degree that Shane thought maybe only a few other players understood.

Shane had always thought that playing the best hockey of his life came from competing against Rozanov. Now he wondered if that was only because he hadn't played *with* him before.

Also—and he'd never admit this to Ilya as long as he lived—it kind of did something to him seeing him in his Hollander jersey. Every time Ilya got on a breakaway, or made a beautiful pass, or dodged a hit, Shane felt a little swell of pride like, *that one's mine.* He wasn't, not really, but everyone else thought he was, and of all the people Shane could have ended up appearing to be married to, Ilya was a pretty impressive husband to have. And wearing Shane's name on his back made it feel like maybe he thought that went in the reverse as well.

"Hey, Hollander." Carter Vaughn interrupted Shane's post-game train of thoughts, and he looked up from scrubbing his towel through his hair. Vaughn usually played with Scott Hunter for The Admirals and had always seemed friendly to Shane. The kind of guy who was still grinning even after his team got their asses handed to them.

"Hey, Vaughn." Shane smiled back tentatively. He was still uncertain of his reception in the hockey community at large, but he reminded himself that Vaughn was one of Hunter's best friends. "What's up?"

"We're going to the beach tomorrow. A bunch of guys booked some surfing thing, so you can try it out if you want. Bring Rozanov."

"Oh, okay. Thanks." Shane's gut instinct was to say *no thanks,* but if

there was ever a chance to have some fun and stop being so "boring" it was the All-Star game, when they had a whole day off, the competitiveness of the season was on hold, and the rest of Shane's team wasn't here. Besides, Ilya would never lay off him if he said no to them getting to go surfing.

Press was endless, then everyone stayed up incredibly late at the after party. Shane stumbled up to the hotel room he was sharing with Ilya, far enough into the night that it was morning, and collapsed in bed. He woke up briefly when Ilya came in, some time later, then slept heavily until several hours after his alarm would usually go off.

Ilya was awake but still in bed, scrolling through his phone.

"The guys are going to the beach to surf today. I said we'd go. You want to, yeah?"

"Surfing? Yes. I'd like to try."

"Okay. We'll meet in the lobby at eleven."

Ilya hummed in agreement.

Shane didn't bother taking another shower, figuring he was just going to get sandy and salty soon anyway, so they hung out in silence for a while, picking through the morning's notifications. At nine-thirty, Shane got dressed and went down for breakfast. A bunch of the guys were already there, looking more upright and less hungover than Shane had expected, and Shane just hung on the edges, eating his oatmeal and fruit and letting the conversation wash over him.

Ilya appeared at ten forty-five, perching himself on the arm of Shane's chair and eating a bagel out of a napkin while arguing with Zane Boodram about whether his penalty last night had truly been slashing or not. Shane amused himself while they chatted by tucking all his strawberry tops in Ilya's pocket for him to find later. It was probably the closest he'd get to vitamin C all day.

The group at the beach was rowdy and revitalized after food, water, and coffee.

Surfing, charitably, was chaos.

A few of the guys clearly knew what they were doing, but most of them didn't, and there were a few instructors to help out, but the primary activity for the next hour was basically getting dunked in the

ocean over and over.

Shane found he enjoyed the full-body focus of trying to keep his balance, but the instructor told him he needed to be more aggressive if he was going to catch a wave. It was maybe a little too close to the feedback he got about his forecheck, so he decided he was done for the day. The others were still goofing off with their boards out in the surf when Shane hiked back up to the beach, returned his board, and peeled his wetsuit off. He ran back out into the water to rinse off the sweat, and found a spot where he could float and watch Ilya and Vaughn take turns trying to get up and stay up.

Ilya was *terrible* at surfing.

It was sort of life-affirming, really, to see Ilya entirely suck at something for once. Cathartic.

Delightful.

Shane seriously considered catching some of it on video, but he'd seen Hayes with his phone out earlier, and if Ilya caught Shane filming him, even if it was to make fun of him, he'd find a way to be arrogant about it.

Shane ducked under the next wave then popped up again to see Ilya and Vaughn were finally wrapping it up, swimming towards shore.

Ilya emerged from the surf like a sea god, golden threads glowing in his hair from the sinking sun. Shane just stood there, like an idiot, staring at him as he marched through the shallow water towards him. He was laughing, bright and free, completely at ease with being hopeless at something in a way that Shane always found a struggle.

Ilya shook his head, spraying saltwater everywhere, then arrived at Shane's side. Ilya hooked his arm around Shane's neck and drew him into a half hug. "Did you see that?"

"Yeah. Don't give up your day job," Shane told him.

Ilya barked out a laugh and kept working his way up through the surf towards the beach, dragging Shane along with him. "Day job is winter only. Maybe I need something to do during the summer, no?" Ilya tapped a flat palm against Shane's chest.

Shane flushed at the same time as goosebumps burst along his arms, Ilya's casual contact with him creating a similar feeling inside him to

the contrast between the hot sun and the cool water. "Not a lot of surfing in Ottawa," Shane reminded him.

"Maybe tied to the back of a snow plow." They arrived at the edge of the copse of towels where the other players were sprawled, enjoying the last of the rapidly dwindling winter sun. Ilya kicked the bottom of Hayes's foot. "Did you save me a beer?"

Hayes mumbled something that probably wasn't words into the folded shirt he was using as a pillow, and Ilya turned to press an obnoxiously loud kiss to Shane's temple before releasing him to go rummage around in the cooler.

Shane dropped abruptly to his towel, heart pounding. Ilya found all of this so easy, the casual affection, the little touches, the pet names—why did Shane still find it so hard? He picked some sand out from between his toes, then looked back up in time to see Ilya unzip his wet suit to his waist, peel the skin-tight rubber from his shoulders, then roll it down til it hung dangerously low on his hips. He tipped his head back to take a drink from the beer he'd found, his throat working, light reflecting off the sand and drops of water that clung to his skin.

Shane knew what he'd find if he tugged that zipper down just a little further. His mouth watered at the thought. He wanted to worship Ilya's sea-damp skin, lick the salt off it, and suck his length deep down his throat. Where had that thought come from?

Shane was sore and tired in a way that was different from playing hockey or working out at the gym. Fighting the powerful waves and struggling to get level on the bucking board was exhausting in a fun way. It was a way that reminded him of good sex, as little of it as he'd had. It was a giddy, exhilarating kind of tired, and he could tell by the extra sparkle in Ilya's eyes that he was feeling that way too. It made Shane's blood pump south in a way that could become extremely embarrassing in his thin swim shorts.

Ilya plopped down on Shane's towel, next to him, rucking it up and spraying sand everywhere.

"Careful," Shane grumbled, fixing the corner and brushing the sand away. Thankfully, Ilya's behaviour usually did away with the threat of an inappropriate erection pretty efficiently. Shane just had to focus on what was coming out of his mouth and ignore what was peeking out of his wetsuit.

It got easier after a raucous dinner at a beachfront bar, when the sun had finally dipped too low and a chill settled over the beach. They all changed into warmer clothes and gathered around a firepit, getting it crackling merrily. Ilya claimed a camping chair and sprawled out with his legs hooked over one of its fabric arms.

Shane grabbed a soda from the nearby cooler, needing to give his body a break after last night, and picked his way around the fire, trying to find a spot to sit. Ilya grabbed him around the waist and tried to pull him down into his lap.

"Ilya! That chair cannot take our weight." Shane tried to keep his balance and keep the soda can from spilling at the same time.

"Even my dear husband refuses to cuddle with me," Ilya said mock-sadly, and Shane huffed, then dropped onto the sand in front of him, leaning back against Ilya's chair.

"Must be nice for you guys to play together," Boodram said, and Shane tensed, but the murmured assent around the fire didn't seem cruel or mocking.

"Yeah, it's gotta be like a second honeymoon," Hayes added, "considering how little time you must've had together since the first one."

"Is very nice," Ilya agreed. He ruffled Shane's hair. "Even better that we won yesterday."

There was a mix of groans and cheers at that, Brophy being shoved out of his chair by Casey when he threw his arms up in victory. "It's not like you had anything to do with the win," Brophy said, and everyone laughed.

The conversation shifted away from Ilya and Shane, though Ilya's hand didn't shift out of Shane's hair.

"We never really got a first honeymoon," Shane mused, tipping his head back to look at Ilya.

"You want me to take you somewhere fancy?" Ilya was grinning now.

"Hayden took Jackie to Paris."

Ilya made a *pfff* sound. "That is because Hayden has no creativity. I would take you somewhere more interesting."

Shane shook his head, smiling as he took a sip from his drink. The thought of traveling with Ilya was an amusing one. They'd probably murder each other before the plane even touched down. Or Shane would push him off a pier somewhere *interesting.*

Ilya seemed hellbent on keeping their cover story strong, petting Shane's hair, curling around his back in his chair, squeezing his shoulder, and calling him pet names all night.

"Well, I think it's time for bed," Ilya announced, and Shane half-startled awake, realizing he'd been dozing. "What do you think, sweetheart? Are you *tired?"* Ilya practically purred the question, making Shane's cheeks inflame instantly.

Shane muttered something about being fucking exhausted, no innuendo added, *thank-you-very-much,* and started gathering up his stuff. As they made their way across the beach towards the hotel, Shane asked Ilya, "Why do you always say stuff like that?"

Ilya turned to him in question, but seemed to get the answer from Shane's expression. He chuckled. "To make your face do that." He poked the tip of Shane's nose. "Is funny."

"What if you're making someone else uncomfortable?"

Ilya's amused expression melted into a frown. "I wouldn't be friends with someone who was made uncomfortable by who I am."

Shane's stomach churned unpleasantly. He had the urge to say, *what if you don't have a choice?* But he bit his tongue.

Ilya seemed to hear the question anyway. "If Montreal is not—?"

"It's fine," Shane snapped, cutting him off. "We all know you're the outgoing socialite between the two of us anyway. I'm not as good as you at making friends."

Ilya set his terrifyingly perceptive gaze on Shane and swept it up and down, reigniting the flush Shane had just barely managed to tamp back down. He didn't say anything until they were in the elevator, headed up to their shared room. "Your teammates…what do they think?"

Shane shrugged tightly. "They think sixty-three goals in a season isn't worth having to share the showers with a faggot."

Ilya sharpened all over like a feral cat seeing a threat. "Management…?"

"Wishes I would shut up and play hockey."

"Maybe they just wish you would shut up because you are very annoying." Ilya sparkled at him, eyes pinned to Shane as he waited to see if the risky joke had paid off.

Shane snorted, giving Ilya his reward easily. "I thought you were the annoying one and I was the boring one."

"Don't sell yourself short, Hollander." He slung his arm around Shane's shoulders as the elevator doors slid open. "You can be both the annoying one and the boring one, and I will be the sexy one."

Shane shook his head, smiling, and let Ilya drag them to their hotel room. Ilya fumbled with the key card, so Shane took it and unlocked the door, pushing Ilya in ahead of him. He thought about the first time they'd been forced to share, how wound up he was at the idea of just being that close to Ilya. And then what it had turned into.

Now it felt natural to collapse on the bed farthest from the window, stretching out his sore surfing muscles, watching Ilya rummage through his luggage as he got ready for a shower. When had that started feeling normal? For them to share space?

Ilya peeled off his shirt, tossing it aside, and Shane lit up like a Christmas tree inside.

Okay *normal* might have been an exaggeration.

"Shower," Ilya mumbled, followed by a string of contemplative Russian that Shane didn't bother asking him to translate. A moment later, the water clicked on.

Shane lay back on his bed and stretched out, still enjoying the unusual flavour of burn in his muscles from the surfing. These few days had been…nice. He hadn't expected nice. He'd expected his All-Star teammates to treat both him and Ilya cooly at best and outright antagonistically at worst. Blowing the All-Star game might have been worth it to them to put a disgusting homo in their place, and Shane hadn't realized until now how on edge he'd been. But Ilya's friends on the Cens weren't the the only nice guys in the NHL, and it was a nice thing to find out.

Shane picked up his phone and texted Hayden. ***Enjoying your day off?***

Hayden sent back a picture of him on the couch with his new baby asleep on his stomach. ***Pretty great.***

Shane grinned. ***Say hi to Jackie for me!***

Say fuck you to Ilya for me!

A few minutes later, Ilya came out of the shower with his curls in a damp mess, the integrity of the towel around his hips looking as threatened as a rookie goalie with an entire offensive line in his crease. Shane tried, *desperately,* not to stare, but his eyes simply refused to go anywhere else besides the deep V on either side of Ilya's sculpted abs.

Shane licked his lips, then dragged his eyes up to where Ilya was—

Watching him. Smirking.

Shane glared back. He was about to come up with something deeply scathing to toss at Ilya when they were interrupted by the hoots and hollers of their All-Star teammates coming up from the beach and splitting into the rooms on either side of them.

Ilya's smirk deepened.

"Whatever you're thinking right now the answer is no," Shane said firmly.

Ilya stalked over to Shane's bed as Shane gracelessly scrambled away from him until he was backed up against the headboard. "I think they are starting to wonder if maybe we are not married for real."

"Are you kidding? They were joking that this was our honeymoon, Rozanov. I think we're fine."

"I don't know," Ilya purred. "If this was our honeymoon, we would surely be enjoying ourselves right now. A hotel room all to ourselves and on the same team for once. Very romantic."

"There's nothing more than a cardboard wall between us and our friends. We would absolutely *not* do *that* right now."

Ilya put a knee up on the bed, and Shane's breath caught, waiting for the towel to finally give up the ghost, but it held on, only parting to

flash some thick, muscular thigh. "I would."

"Well, you're more of an exhibitionist than I am."

"I think you would not be that hard to convince, Hollander."

"Ilya," Shane protested breathlessly. "Don't you dare."

"Oh, *Shane,"* Ilya moaned, still smirking. He did his best to sound scandalized, projecting like a stage actor. "But what if our friends hear?"

Shane smacked him on his chest. "Stop that," he hissed.

"Baby, that feels so good." Ilya caught Shane's hand when he went for another smack. He dropped his voice low again. "I didn't know you were into hitting, Hollander, but I always like to try new things."

Shane snatched his hand back and tried to glare, but he could feel a smile curving up his lips, and when Ilya winked, he laughed then slapped his hand over his own mouth, trying to frown instead. "You're an idiot," he whispered.

"You are the idiot who married me," Ilya shot back. He leaned forward to brace both hands on the headboard, about to give it a thump, but that meant he was leaning over Shane, and when he looked down, their eyes met.

The teasing glint evaporated, replaced with a smoldering heat that lit Shane on fire. They stayed frozen there for long enough that it passed the point of Shane being able to brush it off as nothing. He couldn't deny he'd been thinking about this all day, maybe for months, since the photoshoot, every time Ilya touched him. What was the harm in enjoying themselves? It was what everyone expected, they could both use the chance to blow off some steam, and last time had been really, really good. Sleeping together once hadn't caused them any trouble, so why not do it again?

Shane reached out and pinched the hem of the towel, eyes not leaving Ilya's. He waited to be told to stop. Ilya said nothing but his lips parted, and he sucked in an audible huff of air. Shane pulled.

The towel finally gave way and slipped down to the bed, leaving Ilya bare. His cock was already half hard, and when Shane's eyes fixed on it, it throbbed fuller. Shane licked his lips and reached out with one hand, landing it on Ilya's upper thigh. Ilya leaned into the touch, a

barely-there noise leaking from his throat.

Shane wrapped his hand around Ilya's cock and sucked in what felt like his first breath in a while. He gripped and stroked, and Ilya folded forward with a groan, pressing his forehead to his hands where they still gripped the headboard. "Hollander," he breathed.

Shane leaned forward and wrapped his lips around the head of Ilya's cock. It muffled the sound he made, a moan that escaped around it. He just couldn't help how much he wanted this, even if he knew he'd be furious at himself later. And it felt so good to be wanted back, especially by a man who made everything look so easy; to hear Ilya's bitten-off groan, not showy for others, but quiet and private just for them; to feel the way his hips jerked when Shane sucked and tongued at the slit. He was barely able to resist fucking into Shane's mouth. Shane's own cock was almost painfully hard at the thought of all that tension giving way.

He gripped Ilya's ass and drove him deeper, relaxing his jaw and taking the weight of Ilya's heavy cock on his tongue while those thick muscles flexed under his hands. "Yes," Ilya murmured, "fuck yes, fuck —" and then his words dissolved into garbled, whispered Russian as he bumped against the entrance to Shane's throat.

Shane gagged, and he felt a flash of frustration that he hadn't done this enough to be claimed the way he wanted. But that would probably require a lot of practice—a lot of time begging for Ilya to fuck his face. *Fuck,* his body liked that thought.

When he whined, Ilya chuckled a little breathlessly. "You want it, Hollander." Not a question, but Shane nodded as best he could. "Yes," Ilya panted as his hips began to move. "Yes."

Shane was vaguely aware that without meaning to, Ilya was making good on his threat, the movement of his hips and his iron grip driving the headboard into the wall. Shane didn't even care anymore. That was a problem for later. Now, there was only the smooth glide of Ilya's cock stretching his lips, the salty drops of precome on Shane's tongue, the thrilling way Ilya grunted when Shane hollowed his cheeks.

He found his release in his fist almost as soon as he realized he was touching himself. He tried to be quiet, to muffle his whimpers with Ilya's cock. In his head, he was shouting Ilya's name; it would be tearing out of him like a cry of victory as he threw his head back and

shuddered. As it was, he spasmed around Ilya's cock, neck straining. His come painted his fingers and abs and a moment later Ilya pressed deep and Shane felt his release coat the inside of his throat.

"Fuck," Ilya breathed, and he sat back on his heels then tipped over sideways onto the bed.

Shane stared at the ceiling for a moment as he swallowed, that giddy surge from earlier welling up in him again. "Think we convinced them?" he asked, voice hoarse, and when Ilya burst out in surprised laughter, Shane joined him until his ribs ached.

Ilya gestured towards Shane's spent cock. "I was going to do that for you." Shane wondered if he was imagining the little edge of affront, like Ilya was annoyed by the thought that Shane might think him selfish in bed.

"I know," Shane said. "Couldn't help myself."

Ilya bumped his toes against Shane's ankle. He grinned. "You get off on sucking my cock, Hollander?"

Shane's cheeks heated, but it was the truth. "Don't let it go to your head," he mumbled, but Ilya chuckled, clearly delighted.

Ilya's big, warm hand stroked up the inside of Shane's thigh, and even though his cock was done, Shane felt a little jolt of interest at the touch. When Shane turned to look, Ilya was watching him, eyes bright and intense, fixated on Shane's.

"Ily—" Shane started, but Ilya leaned in and kissed him. It wasn't the silly, laughing kiss of last time, the electric buzz of the photoshoot, or the awkward, simple kiss of their first. It was filled with tempered heat, focused and intent and terrifyingly familiar, Ilya's tongue gently parting Shane's lips then licking between them.

When Ilya released him, Shane was breathing heavily again, hands balled into fists and clamped tightly against his body.

Ilya watched him a moment longer, then winked. "Goodnight, Shane Hollander." And then he was gone, sliding into his own bed and switching off the light.

Shane lay awake for a long time, unable to sleep.

Chapter 10: The Photo

February 2012 – Las Vegas, NV

When Shane walked into the locker room, he got an uncomfortable feeling of deja vu. His teammates were looking at their phones and whispering. Hayden was frowning alternately at his screen and at Shane. Shane sat down next to him with a thud. “What am I the last to fucking know this time?”

“Nothing really,” Hayden said reassuringly.

“Doesn’t look like nothing,” someone called, but when Shane looked up, he couldn’t tell who it had been.

“Tabloid bullshit,” Hayden said, a little louder. Shane held out his hand, and Hayden put his phone in it.

There was a photo of Ilya having dinner with a stunning woman with long hair so blonde it was almost white. She was wearing a snug, red dress and a smug smile as she raised her wine glass to Ilya. Their calves were touching under the table. The way Ilya was looking at her…Shane felt a flare of jealousy that he beat back as fast as he could. He didn’t actually have any claim on those bedroom eyes, even if Ilya had said he hadn’t been with anyone since they were outed.

He frowned. Ilya had said that, and Shane believed him.

“When was this even taken?” he asked.

“Like 2009, people are saying, though the article is making it sound like it was last week,” Hayden answered, while Shane scrolled down the page.

Rozanov cheating scandal, the uncreative headline read. *Will Hollander ice him out?* The woman in the photo was revealed to be Svetlana Petrova and Shane’s unease faded. “Oh that’s Stevlana,” he said comfortably. “She’s one of his Russian friends.”

Ilya had taken a couple of calls in Russian when they’d been together over Christmas; one had made him frown, and the other had made him laugh and shake his head. When Shane asked, he’d said the first one was his brother calling about his father and that Ilya didn’t want to talk about it. The second had apparently been his friend Svetlana.

The way he'd hesitated just for a moment over the word *friend* made Shane think there was almost certainly some history there, but Ilya had just shrugged and said, "Is nice to talk in Russian sometimes," and then flicked dish water at Shane and picked up the dish towel again.

"Looks like more than a friend," Laurent chortled, looking towards his sidekick Archer, who gamely joined in.

"Thought Rozanov was gay, but maybe he changed his mind," he offered with a leer.

"That's fucking biphobia, man," Hayden said knowledgably.

"Just because you can't keep it in your pants doesn't mean other people don't have friends who are women," J.J. snapped.

He appreciated his friends sticking up for him, but he was starting to notice that they were the only ones who did. It was ridiculous. He was the top scorer on this team, and all they wanted to do was talk shit about his personal life?

Shane slapped his hands on his knees and stood up. "Are we playing hockey today or what? Because if you're all just going to sit on your asses and gossip, I don't need to be here."

"Chill, Hollander, we're just having a laugh," one of his other teammates protested. It was Schneider, a defenseman who was usually pretty quiet.

Shane was abruptly reminded of what Scott Hunter had asked him after the game in New York. *Do* you *think it's funny?* It was getting less funny by the day, and now that he was paying attention, it seemed like just as many of the jokes were about his sexuality as about Ilya.

"Your stand up routine isn't any better than your hockey," he snapped, and headed for the ice. He'd remind them of what a hockey player looked like.

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After a game that added three more goals to Shane's season total, he had a voicemail from Ilya.

"I'm sorry, Shane." Shane was surprised to hear a note of true anxiety in his voice. "Is old photo. Call me."

Shane's phone rang again in his hand as he went to return the call. Ilya again.

"Hey," Shane said as soon as he picked up. "It's fine, I know it's an old photo. We weren't even together then." As soon as the word *together* left his mouth, he wished he could call it back, but he could hear Ilya exhale in relief so maybe it was the right thing to say.

"They are saying I cheated. I would not. If we were married, I would not."

Shane didn't know why that made him uneasy—it was just as likely that Ilya had accidentally used a different verb tense than that it meant anything—but it did. "We *are* married."

"Yes, and I have not."

"You mean if we were married for real." Why couldn't he let this go? Before, when they'd talked about their *deal* it hadn't bothered Shane, but now it felt like an itch he couldn't even find let alone scratch. He didn't want Ilya sleeping with other people, he acknowledged with a frown…even if the press never found out about it. He just…he didn't like the idea.

"Then too. We have a deal. I would not break it. I would never…I don't want to hurt you, Shane." The gentle, still-rare use of his first name did hurt a little, somehow. It reminded him of softer moments when he'd lain awake wondering if they had more in common, more possibility between them than they were admitting. More than just a deal. Maybe friends. "And I don't want these stupid websites to hurt you, even if it's a lie."

Shane pressed the heel of his hand against his tired eyes. "Yeah. Yeah, sorry, I know. Long day."

"The team is saying things."

"Your team?"

"No, my team knows it is…" Shane could imagine Ilya searching for the word, maybe trying to remember what someone had used earlier. Were his fingers dancing in the air like they sometimes did? "Misunderstanding," he finished. "But your team has not been as flexible." He didn't phrase it like a question; they both knew it was true.

Shane laughed, but even to his own ears it was a bitter, humorless thing. “They’re acting like we’re halfway to divorce.”

It was Ilya’s turn to snort. “They wish.” And Shane…couldn’t find even a bitter laugh for that.

Because it was true. They did wish. And when he put it that way, it was a pretty shitty thing for them to wish. They hadn’t even tried to get to know Ilya. And sure, it was a sham, but they didn’t know that. One of his teammates had married the sister of an enforcer for Philadelphia who’d earned at least three of the guys on the team some hospital time, and after some initial groans she’d slotted right in with all the other wives and girlfriends.

But Shane had a husband, and he played for the wrong team. That did get a surprised laugh out of him—Ilya played for the wrong team and they both *played for the wrong team.*

“Whatever,” he said, trying to shake off the itch of discomfort. “It’s stupid. They’ll get their wish in the summer anyway.”

Ilya was quiet for long enough that Shane looked down at his phone to see if they were still connected. “Yes,” he finally said. The word sounded heavy with his accent around it. “Our amicable divorce.”

“Like we planned.”

“That is the plan you made.” The words were flat, and there was something off in Ilya’s tone that Shane couldn’t place, but it stuck out like the resounding use of ‘you.’

“That *we* made.”

“Yes. Was a long time ago. Before…everything.”

Before photo shoots, and interviews, and coming with each other’s names on their lips, and Christmas morning, and shinny with the neighbor kids, and…all the reminders of the relationship Ilya could be —should be— having if he weren’t tied to Shane. If they didn’t have a deal. And vice versa, but that realization didn’t grip his heart in the same way.

“You want to get divorced sooner.” The words tasted unexpectedly like ash on Shane’s tongue. Why couldn’t anything just go according to the fucking plan?

“Would be easy now,” Ilya said. “We have a little scandal. Irreconcilable differences.” Words that had no business sounding sexy in his rough, musical voice but everything did. He must have done research, planned this, in order to even know the phrase. "No one would find it a big surprise. I have a reputation and you are…" Shane imagined his arm waving around again, trying to find the word. "Good boy."

There was still something very wrong with his tone, though. How long had he been holding this back? How long had Shane been holding him back, thinking he was helping? Fuck, how long had he been taking shit from his team for something that wasn’t even…that wasn’t…He felt a hot flare of anger at the whole situation.

“I’m not going to let you take the fall on a goddamn cheating scandal, Ilya.”

“Why not? Is what people expect.”

“Well, fuck them. You’re a good man, and I already hate that people don’t think so.”

This stunned them both into silence. But Shane wasn’t going to take back something that was true. His heart was pounding like he’d been skating sprints.

“Okay,” Ilya said quietly. “We will find another way.”

“Yeah.” Another way to end this as soon as possible, before they did more damage to each other’s careers. Lives. “Next time we’re in the same place, we’ll make a new plan, okay? I’m…I’m tired now, I’m gonna go.”

Ilya sighed, and Shane imagined he could see him nod, the abrupt shake of his curls he gave when he came to a decision. “Goodnight.” Ilya said it so gently that Shane couldn’t help but feel like he was saying more. Maybe *goodbye.*

February 2012 – Ottawa, ON

Shane spent a lot of time looking at the photo of Ilya with Svetlana. It wasn't really the fact that she was beautiful, or that she was Russian, or that, apparently—he'd Googled—she knew everything there was to know about hockey. It was the way they were looking at each other.

It wasn't just lust, it was comfort and affection and trust. And Shane was holding Ilya back from getting all of that. It didn't really matter what the press thought. No matter what they did, there would be stories on the internet, but they couldn't let it rule all of their decisions. They needed a divorce, not because of the story it made, but because Shane was feeling too much like the metal ball on the end of Ilya's chain. Shane couldn't make him happy, and Ilya deserved to be happy.

1217 Shane texted Ilya, after their next game against each other. ***Hilton.***

Everything okay?

Yeah. Just think we should finish making that plan.

Will your team be there?

No, I got a separate room, like you do. So they'll think we're together.

And then invite me over so we **are** ***together.***

Shane could hear the laughter in Ilya's words.

Yeah, but it has a balcony so I can shove you off if need be.

He imagined Ilya laughing in response, but Shane didn't get another text before there was a knock on his hotel room door, and he opened it to let Ilya in.

Ilya looked tired and stressed out in a way that Shane hadn't seen since their marriage was outed. He wondered if his team was giving him shit about the supposed cheating too, or if it was something else.

"Hey," Shane said. They hadn't talked much since their phone call after the article. "How are you?"

"Fine," Ilya said. "I did not sleep much last night."

"Sorry."

Ilya plucked the TV remote off the desk in the corner and started twisting it around between his hands. "What do you want to talk about?"

Shane hesitated. He didn't know why the words were so hard to get

out. "We have to get that divorce."

Ilya's eyes flashed up from the ugly hotel carpet to meet Shane's, intense and ignited with something Shane couldn't put a name to. "I know."

"I mean, maybe we should do it now. No matter when it happens, the press is going to make a big deal out of it, and so will our teams."

Ilya quirked an eyebrow in challenge to that, but Shane ignored it. It was more than obvious that Ilya hated the Voyageurs, but that was probably written into his Cens contract. It didn't mean anything specific.

"So maybe we should just get it over with."

"I thought you did not like the cheating thing."

"I don't. I hate it. And I don't think we should say that's why. We should just say it's too hard to be on different teams, living apart, always on the road, tormented by the press, and though we still—uh—love each other a lot, we're better as friends."

"And rivals?" Ilya asked, with a smirk that transformed him back into the Ilya that Shane knew.

"No matter what else we are, we'll always be rivals."

Ilya nodded, and his expression clouded over again. "I think we should wait until summer."

"Aren't you—I mean…do you really want to wait that long?"

"Is not far. Just a few months. We have too much hockey in the meantime, anyway. It will be over very fast." He looked…sad. Which Shane couldn't figure out either. There was something he was missing, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"Okay. I'm okay to wait if you are," he tried, flailing around for an answer.

But that didn't do it; Ilya's expression remained unchanged. "I will get a lawyer and find out what we need to do."

"Do I need my own?"

That earned him a small smile. "I think only if you are planning to

take half my cars in the break-up."

Shane snorted. "As if I'd want any of those."

"Maybe I can make a rule of the divorce that you have to take one of them. Is just sad seeing you drive around in that thing, Hollander."

"Maybe I can make you take a little humility? Kindness? An interest in vegetables?"

"Boring."

They both fell silent.

"So, summer then?"

"Yes, no one will be looking at us during the off-season and we will have time to work out the paperwork." The undercurrent of anger or sadness or frustration was still wound through Ilya's voice, and Shane was at a loss to fix it.

"Alright."

"Is that all we needed to talk about?" Ilya was giving off *this meeting could have been an e-mail* vibes, and for some reason, instead of not caring, Shane tried to think of something else that would have made Ilya's trip over to the hotel worth it. He even thought about going to his knees, but the discomfort in the room made him unable to face the potential awkwardness of being rejected.

"Uh. Yeah, I guess so." Shane shrugged. "So, we'll talk when our seasons are over."

"Yes. For you that will be very soon, and for me that will be after the Stanley Cup is in my hands."

"You wish. Though, maybe I'll let you touch it after *I* win it."

Ilya tossed the remote on the bed and shoved his hands in his pockets. His eyes were dark and unreadable. "See you on the ice, then."

"Bye." Shane just stood there while Ilya left.

It didn't feel like he thought it would feel, having a plan in place. Shane thought it would feel steadying, comforting, like plans usually did for him, but instead it just felt…complicated. It wasn't like he and Ilya could just exit out of each other's lives and pretend this had never

happened. They would see each other on the ice, play against each other, go out with their teammates and end up at the same bar after a game.

It was only February, but it suddenly felt like the season was almost over. Because after it, he and Ilya wouldn't be married anymore, and the thought made Shane squirm with discomfort. This marriage was going to follow them everywhere until they both retired.

But that wasn't what made Shane's chest feel a little too tight. It was the realization that Ilya wouldn't be at the Hollanders' for Christmas next year; that when they bent for the first face-off next season it wouldn't be as the NHL's only married athletes but as rivals and exes; that soon, Ilya wouldn't have an excuse to wrap his arm around Shane's waist, or smack a kiss to his cheek, or pull Shane into his lap.

Shane shook his head then started stripping off for a cold shower. His churning stomach and restless mind and tight throat were all reasons why they had to stop this messed up thing as soon as possible. He just had to make it through this season.

March 2012 – Ottawa, ON

“You wound me,” Ottawa goalie Wyatt Hayes said when he spotted Shane in the bar. He clutched his chest with faux dramatics. “I am wounded. A head shot? With a less accurate player I’d say you were out to get me.”

“A corner shot,” Shane corrected, smiling a little bashfully about his game-winning goal. “And I had to take the pocket.”

“I know, I know. You’re gonna get away with that exactly once.”

“I’d expect nothing less. Can you forgive me?”

“Is not *his* forgiveness you need.” Ilya’s gruff voice came from Shane’s left and a moment later he planted one of his signature smacking kisses against Shane’s hairline. Shane froze for a moment in surprise when Ilya’s arm snaked around his waist—they hadn’t exactly left things in a ‘kiss and hug’ mood when they’d privately decided to part ways last month.

Operative word: privately.

Shane forced himself to relax and smile. Ilya was just keeping up appearances. Like they'd agreed. Like they both wanted. "Hello, sweetheart," Ilya said in greeting, looking down at Shane with a smile. It didn't reach his eyes, which looked a little tired and a little sad. Shane didn't know if it was because Ilya was so done with being around him or because he'd lost the game, but it gave him the weird urge to smooth his fingers over Ilya's brows. He did, to keep up appearances; a gentle touch that made Ilya's lips part in surprise. For a moment, Shane saw something curious and questioning in his eyes that made something else flutter inside Shane in response, but then the mask fell over Ilya's face again.

When he pulled Shane into his lap, Shane went dutifully, but it felt different. Everything felt different. He hated it.

"Maybe we *should* just end it now," Shane said to Hayden on the walk back to their hotels–Shane would stop off at the one was staying at while he pretended to stay with Ilya, and Hayden would continue on to the team hotel. "He's clearly desperate to move on."

Hayden snorted. "Man, I don't know what gives you that idea. He was all over you tonight, just like always."

"For show. Because we have to. Fuck, Hayden, everything feels completely different. I don't know how long we can keep this up."

Hayden frowned. "It feels different because it's fake now? Hasn't it always been fake?"

"Yeah," Shane said, the word still huffing in the air as a steamy exhale in the still-cold late winter air. "But now it's like…"

"Nothing's real at all?"

Shane felt relieved Hayden understood. "Yes, exactly."

"Which means all those other times you've gone out together, it was real, then."

What? "No, that's—nevermind."

Hayden raised his eyebrows but let it go. He didn't understand anything.

***

“Where’s Ilya?” Shane's mom said in surprise when she opened the door. She peeked around him like she might see Ilya still getting out of the car, but it was just Shane today. He hadn’t even asked Ilya what he was doing. Shane had an off day in Ottawa after the game the night before, so he had a rare window for dinner at home with his parents. Which, he supposed, ordinarily he might have brought his regionally-located husband along to.

“Good to see you too, mom,” Shane huffed, before enveloping her small frame in his arms. Something smelled amazing. Onion, ginger, and… “Did you make tsukune?” Shane asked. The chicken meatballs that were one of his childhood favorites had also been a big hit the last time he was home for a meal. At Christmas. With Ilya. Who’d eaten, like, twelve of them.

Something must have crossed his face at the thought, because his mom looked at him searchingly. He ducked his head and tried to slide inside, but she pulled him into a surprisingly strong hug. Both Shane and Yuna Hollander were underestimated due to their size. “I’m happy to see you too, Shane, of course I am. It’ll be nice to have some time just with you. We see Ilya all the time at his games.” Right. Because they were huge Ottawa fans, and trying so hard to be good in-laws.

And in that moment, Shane wanted to tell her. He wanted to curl up on the couch under the Ottawa blanket with a cup of green tea and tell her everything. And then he wanted to fire pucks against the garage for like two hours.

When she pulled back from the hug, Yuna reached up to hold his face in both her soft, cool hands, looking at him closely. Maybe he didn’t need to tell her. Maybe she somehow already knew.

Her fingers dropped to the ends of his hair. “It’s getting long,” she said, then, “almost a hat trick last night. Maybe you need some practice time with your mom. We can pull the mats out after lunch.”

After a young Shane had decimated their original garage doors and yielded some noise complaints, they’d gotten big mats that they could drag out of the garage and put up in front of the doors while Shane took his best shot, sometimes with his mom at his side.

“Yeah,” Shane said. “Yeah, that sounds great. Hi, Dad,” he said, as David came into the hall, wiping his hands on a dish towel slung over his shoulder.

“Shane,” his dad said, smiling and pulling him into a hug. “Almost a

hat trick last night!"

"It's like he remembers nothing I taught him," his mom teased, and he followed them gratefully inside.

Being full of tsukune and vegetables and a curry that his dad had experimented pretty successfully with went a long way towards lulling Shane into the sense of security that came with feelings of home.

"So," Yuna said, as they positioned the first mat against the garage doors. "What's going on with you and Ilya?"

Shane fumbled his side of the mat. "I don't know what you mean."

"You don't have to tell me, Shane, but don't lie." He stayed quiet as they dragged the other mat out. "I can see it in your eyes, and I can see it in his. Something's changed since Christmas."

"We're not…we're figuring some stuff out," Shane mumbled noncommittally.

Yuna handed him his stick, which he accepted gratefully, appreciating that it gave him something to do with his hands. "I know you very well, Shane. And I know you like to have a plan. To be sure about things. It's scary to commit your life to someone. But you know what else I know?"

He dared to look at her, and found her looking back, the fine lines around her mouth stern. "That man loves you." Shane almost flinched at the impossibility and promise of the words. What was it about being around Shane and Ilya that left everyone with no doubt of their reality other than them? "And it's a big love, the forever kind. He looks at you the way a mom hopes someone will look at her son. And after almost thirty years with your father…Shane, honey. It's worth it."

He couldn't bring himself to look at her, but managed a quiet, "Thanks, Mom." Insufficient words for how much she believed in him and everything he did, even a marriage that had taken her by surprise to a man she hadn't liked.

"So," Yuna said, firing a puck at the mat and making Shane jump, "next time, bring him to dinner."

Shane answered her shot. "Okay." He could cross that bridge when he came to it. Right now, he just wanted to say thank you and put all of

his reeling thoughts into a little box.

“Now, you want to tell me why the Montreal defense isn’t passing to you?”

Shane half-sighed, half-laughed. She was really taking advantage of his visit to get the scoop. He supposed he’d been a little cagey lately on the phone. And if his troubles with Ilya hadn’t escaped her notice, it was a sure bet that nothing hockey-related got past her eagle eyes. “Not really.”

“How about this: if you win this target practice, you don’t have to talk.”

“Nice try. You know, NHL offenses have nothing on you.”

“Oh, Shane. You spoil your mother.”

He smiled and fired the puck, letting his confusion and hurt fade away with every familiar thud.

March 2012 – Montreal, QC

The Edmonton-Ottawa game started with a photo from Shane’s mom. She’d clearly taken it during the warmup, of Shane’s dad giving a thumbs up over his shoulder. His new Ottawa jersey proclaimed ROZANOV across the shoulders, and Ilya was standing next to him on the edge of the ice, wearing the real thing and looking so smug Shane couldn’t help but laugh.

Ordering you another Hollander jersey right now, Shane texted back. And then, ***Have fun.*** He looked at the photo of Ilya and his dad together and had a sudden pang of longing to be there with his family, cheering for his husband like everything was normal, not tuning into the game on his night off specifically because everyone expected him to know in great detail how his husband's team was doing.

It had been a heated and contentious game, stuck at 1-1 for a long time, and in the beginning of the third period, tempers were clearly running high. The bowl of trail mix in Shane’s lap for snacking was long forgotten. Ilya looked more frustrated than Shane had ever seen him, and he usually thrived on conflict. The reffing had managed to piss off both teams, more than once, and Shane suspected words were being thrown around now that went beyond competitive riling up. He

didn’t like the thought of watching Ilya get in a fight on TV, especially when he looked so uncharacteristically raw, but it wouldn’t be the first time and it wouldn’t be the last.

Shane sat back with a sigh of resignation when he finally saw the retaliation setting up. He winced with vicarious anticipation as Ilya charged for the puck and the opposing player charged for Ilya. At first, it just looked like a typical shoulder check against the boards, although it was definitely a hard hit and the Edmonton player had come in kind of high and from behind. Shane winced as Ilya thudded into the boards—and then saw the way his head bounced hard off the glass. Shane was already on his feet when Ilya crumpled to the ice.

He wasn't moving.

Chapter 11: The Hard Part

Shane realized he'd stood up when the bowl in his lap pinged off the corner of the coffee table and hit the carpet. "Ilya," he said, "get up."

Ilya didn't move.

Players and refs surrounded Ilya where he was sprawled on the ice, and Shane scrambled for his phone, then realized there wasn't anyone he could call. His parents were in the stands, but they wouldn't know any more than what he was getting from the commentators, and Ilya's teammates on the ice were a little too busy to call Shane. But he would be the first call, right? Because he was Ilya's husband.

But if Ilya would just *get up,* then Shane wouldn't have to worry.

Trainers shuffled out onto the ice and several of the players stepped back, giving them space. Shane shuffled side to side as if he could see more at a different angle to the TV. His phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Sweetie?" It was his mom.

"What's happening? Is he okay? Have you seen him move?"

"We're not at a good angle," Yuna said gently. "It was a dirty hit."

Shane tried to agree but there was a knot in his throat he couldn't talk around. This was *Ilya Rozanov.* He was invincible. It was unthinkable that something as stupid as a dirty check from fucking Nelson could take him down. "He'll be okay," Shane managed.

"Of course he will," Yuna said.

They watched in silence as the stretcher came out, and Shane sank back down to the couch, pressing the phone too hard to his cheek. The announcers were saying something about Ilya's record, occasionally replaying footage of the hit which made rage flush through Shane. What if they missed him moving while they were replaying it over and over?

Get up. But Shane knew he wouldn't, not if they were bringing the stretcher out. They lifted Ilya up, and Shane winced when his back hit the red padding. Shane's eyes were hot and blurry so he rubbed the

heel of his hand over them.

"He's awake!" Yuna suddenly announced.

"What?"

"He's conscious. I saw his hand move."

Shane stared at the TV, and sure enough, as the camera rounded to his side, Ilya was clearly talking, waving one hand around. One of the paramedics grabbed his wrist and gently folded it over his stomach.

When Shane checked back in, Yuna was saying, "We're going to follow him to the hospital," grunting a little and apologizing softly as she worked her way through the stands. "We'll keep you posted."

"Okay. Okay. I—I'm getting my keys. Call me if they won't let you in to see him. I don't know what he put on his emergency contact information. *Fuck.* It'll be at least two hours."

"Shane, honey, are you sure you're safe to drive?"

Shane forced himself to stop and really think about that. His gut instinct was that *of course* he was okay, because it wasn't like Ilya was really his husband. But that wasn't quite right. Because even though their marriage was a sham, Shane still couldn't stand to see him hurt. They were…friends? Confidants at least. They shared *something.* Shane didn't know what word to put on it, but he knew it was important. And he knew he needed to be in Ottawa tonight.

"I'm okay. I'll be there as fast as I can."

"Drive carefully, Shane. We'll make sure he's not alone."

"Thanks, mom." Shane hung up and tornadoed around his apartment, throwing a few things in a bag. He knew he wasn't packing efficiently or effectively, but he triple checked that he had his wallet, figuring that as long as he had his credit card and ID, clothes and toothpaste could always be bought if need be.

By the time he got in the car, he hadn't had an update from his mom, so he synced his phone to the car and set directions to the Ottawa Hospital General Campus, figuring he could adjust it closer to the city if they took Ilya somewhere else.

Maybe he's okay and they won't even take him to the hospital, Shane's

brain offered, and he clung to the hope that he'd show up and Ilya would already be home. He'd go to see him and Ilya would laugh at how worried Shane was.

Come on, Hollander. Takes more than an idiot like Nelson to knock out Ilya Rozanov. I am fine.

Shane replayed the scene over and over as he crossed into Ontario, regularly reminding himself to relax his shoulders as his fingers went white-knuckled on the steering wheel. He was off tomorrow, and practice was optional, so at least he didn't have to worry about that. Not that visiting his husband in the hospital wasn't a decent excuse to miss a mandatory practice.

His phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Where are you?" Yuna asked.

"About an hour away."

"He's at Ottawa General but they haven't told us anything yet. I got a nice man from the team admin on the phone, though, and said he was awake and talking before they put him in the ambulance and he was able to move his fingers and toes."

Shane let out a slow, tight breath. "Okay. That's good. Thank you."

"Apparently, he asked for you."

Shane's throat tightened again. Was Ilya just keeping up appearances or did he really want Shane there? Either way, Shane needed to see him and he didn't care if it annoyed Ilya when he actually showed. "I'm coming."

"He'll be okay, Shane. He's tough."

"I know." But he hadn't looked tough sprawled out on the ice, limp and alone. He'd looked impossibly small. Shane just needed to see that smirk, those sparkling eyes, to know he was okay.

The last forty-five minutes of the drive went by in a blur of twisting, writhing thoughts that never coalesced into anything solid.Thankfully, it was late enough that the traffic wasn't too bad, and Shane pulled into the most expensive parking, closest to the front door, without

hesitation.

It was utterly bizarre saying, "I'm his husband," to the ER receptionist, but she got him where he needed to be without any fuss. And then he was stepping into Ilya's room.

Ilya was awake, eyes open and fixed on a man Shane recognized as one of the Centaurs' trainers, standing by his bed. He was okay. Shane made an entirely involuntary noise of relief, and both Ilya and the trainer turned to look at him.

Ilya looked genuinely shocked for a moment, then a wide smile split his lips. "Hollander. You're here." There was a slight softness to his voice, more consonants getting swallowed by his accent than usual.

"Hey. I'm here." Shane stepped up to the side of his bed and awkwardly took his hand, eyes flicking to the trainer. But Ilya wound their fingers together easily. "Are you okay?"

The trainer spoke up. "He has a concussion and a strained shoulder, but nothing's broken. The doctors aren't worried."

"Oh, thank god." Shane squeezed Ilya's hand. "How are you feeling?"

"Shane," Ilya sung, then he said something in flowery-sounding Russian. Shane couldn't translate but there was something about the way Ilya's eyes were pinned to his that suggested it was all for the best it wasn't in English.

The trainer seemed to agree, but his cheeks were turning pink rapidly. "He's on some pretty strong painkillers for the shoulder. I'll just"—he pointed towards the door—"give you guys a moment."

As soon as they were alone, Shane sank down to sit on the edge of Ilya's bed. "You scared the crap out of me," he admitted, and Ilya's eyes twinkled.

"Were you worried about me, Hollander? Is sweet." Ilya didn't seem inclined to release Shane's hand, playing with his fingers. Then he frowned. "They took my wedding ring."

Shane turned over his hand to see the silicone band still wrapped around Ilya's finger. "They gave it back."

"No—it's—" Ilya looked around, his eyes taking too long to focus on the parts of the room. "They took it. I don't know where it is." He

sounded genuinely distressed by the idea.

"Uh. It's okay," Shane tried. "We'll make sure you get it back before we leave."

That seemed to calm Ilya a little, though he still looked annoyed. Ilya was quiet for a long time, even closing his eyes for a moment, then he opened them again. "Who won?"

It was a relief that he remembered he'd been playing hockey, though with Ilya's life, it would have been a solid guess if he hadn't remembered as well. "I don't know," Shane said. "I was driving from Montreal to Ottawa for the rest of the game."

That seemed to confuse Ilya all over again. "What time is it?"

"Just after ten."

"On…today?"

Shane chuckled. "Yes, it's still today. Ten p.m. Here, I'll check the game for you." He pulled out his phone, but Ilya wouldn't let him have his hand back, so he awkwardly poked Google with one finger, phone balanced on his knee. He frowned. "You lost. Sorry."

Ilya sighed, tried to shrug, winced, then sighed again. "Was a shitty game."

"It was," Shane agreed.

Ilya squinted at him. "You came."

Shane nodded. "I did."

"They called you? Cause…husband?" Ilya closed his eyes, brow furrowing, and Shane wished for the first time that he could speak Russian, just so Ilya wouldn't have to fight both a concussion and a second language at the same time.

"No. I was watching the game. I got in the car as soon as they took you off the ice on a stretcher."

Ilya had no answer for that. He looked tired. Not just tired—Shane had seen him tired before—but *drained.*

“Is there anyone I should call?” Shane asked, a little hesitantly. Ilya didn’t seem to be on good terms with his family, but still. He was in

the hospital. “Your brother, maybe?”

Ilya looked at Shane like he was the one who was concussed. *“Fuck* no.”

"Uh, cool. Nevermind. I'm going to go talk to the doctor, okay? You should get some rest."

"Okay."

Shane managed to extract his hand, and he went in search of Ilya's doctor. It was a while before he could talk to her, but she confirmed that Ilya had a concussion, not a bad one, but he'd probably be on injured reserve for two weeks, at least. His shoulder was harder to evaluate in his current state, but she didn't think the strain was too bad, though it was hurting him a lot right now. It was unclear how much healing time he'd need, but nothing serious seemed to be in danger, and there was no reason to think he wouldn't be back on the ice after healing up.

The last of the knot in Shane's chest unwound, but it only revealed a second, tighter knot underneath it: what was going to happen to Ilya while he was healing?

The doctor confirmed that he only needed to be in the hospital for a few more hours and then he'd be discharged, but also told Shane he should have someone with him for the first forty-eight hours, at least, to keep an eye out for worsening symptoms.

There was really only one thing that made sense. What Shane *wanted* to do was ask his parents to take Ilya home with them and watch over him while he went back to Montreal, so he didn't have to figure any of this out. And he knew they'd do it, happily, for him, but spending one holiday together didn’t mean they knew Ilya. Shane couldn't dump Ilya into that situation, nor could he put that much of a burden on his parents. Besides, it wouldn't look very good to abandon his husband right now.

And standing in the doorway of Ilya's room, the lights down low, the ever-present hum of hospital all around him, Shane realized he couldn't do it anyway. He couldn't leave Ilya right now, not until he was back to himself. He looked so unlike himself, dozing in the hospital bed, medical tape on his arm and a sling holding his shoulder immobile. Shane was reminded of the night he'd decided he was going to marry that man. Ilya needed help, and he didn't have anyone else. Fake or not, Shane was his family now.

"Shane!"

Shane turned to see his parents speed hustling down the hallway towards him, and he opened his arms and pulled them both into a tight hug. "He's okay," he told them.

"They wouldn't let us up before. The doctors were with him and apparently in-laws aren't close enough family." There was an edge of judgment in David's voice.

"He's resting now, but it's a concussion and a shoulder strain. They think he'll be fine but he's still a bit loopy."

"Oh, thank god." Shane's mom squeezed his wrist. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay. I'm—I have to take him home with me. They're going to discharge him in a few hours and he needs to stay with someone who can keep an eye on him."

"You're both welcome to stay with us," Yuna offered. "You have tomorrow off."

And of course she knew Shane's schedule. But Shane had already made his decision. "Thank you, but I think he'll be more comfortable at home," Shane said, as if his place in Montreal was at all a home to Ilya. They didn't know it wasn't, though. "It's only a couple hours back, and then if he wants to stay for a while he'll be able to. I have all the injury stuff. Wraps and ice packs and stuff. I'll take him to his apartment after they discharge him and then we'll head to Montreal tomorrow morning."

"Okay."

Both Shane's parents gave him another hug, then peeked their heads in to say hi to Ilya, but he was still out. Yuna and David ended up going out to pick up food for everyone while Shane waited for the doctor to say Ilya could leave. Shane sat in the chair by Ilya's bed, the adrenaline crash tipping him over until his head rested on the mattress next to Ilya's hip. He'd never felt like that before, that deep, unadulterated terror for someone else's well-being.

Shane woke up to fingers stroking through his hair. He smacked his tongue and blinked awake, pushing up to find Ilya looking down at him, his eyes still a little out of focus, but more aware than he'd been an hour ago. He pulled his hand back, and Shane realized he'd been the one petting him. "Hey," Shane said.

"You drool," Ilya replied. "No wonder no one wants to sleep with you, Hollander."

Shane sat up and stretched, throwing a glare in Ilya's direction. "Feeling better, I see."

"Yes. Hurts, though."

"They should let you go soon." Now that Ilya was awake, Shane was feeling less confident about his plan. "They're going to release you in a bit, but you need someone to stay with you. I thought—I was thinking we could stay at your place tonight and then you could come back to Montreal with me until you're feeling better."

To Shane's surprise, Ilya seemed more surprised by that than annoyed. "Really?"

"Yeah?"

"To your place?"

"Yes."

"Is it as boring as you?"

Shane pressed his lips together. He thought about his builders-white walls and plain, wood furniture that he'd bought as a package deal. He sighed. "Yeah, probably."

That made Ilya laugh. "Good," he mumbled.

It was only about twenty minutes more before the doctor returned. Shane stepped out while she rechecked Ilya, then Shane was given a prescription sheet, some concussion care instructions, red flags to look out for, and Ilya was free. Yuna and David followed Shane to Ilya's apartment and put some groceries Yuna had bought them at the 24-hour grocery store into Ilya's fridge.

Shane had a brief moment of panic that they'd notice the lack of pictures of him around Ilya's apartment, but they didn't go into his bedroom, and Ilya didn't really have pictures of anyone, so he hoped it wasn't obvious both that Shane had spent no time here and also that Ilya didn't think about Shane when they weren't together.

While Yuna and David unpacked groceries, Shane helped Ilya wobble to his bedroom and curl up on the bed with a groan. He kept his eyes

closed, so Shane flicked out the light and tossed a blanket over him, then let him be while he stopped his parents from trying to clean. Or maybe move in. He hugged them, thanked them, told them he loved them, and scooted them out the door before they could notice the lack of Shane in Ilya's space.

Left alone, Shane took a moment to just breathe. Ilya was okay. Everything was going to be okay. He stretched out his back, went to the bathroom, and splashed some water on his face, then went to check on Ilya. Ilya was already asleep, so Shane put a glass of water on the bedside table and went to explore Ilya's apartment.

He wasn't going to *snoop,* of course not, but he at least had to find Ilya's guest room. Ilya had a nice gym, a wall of keys for all his cars, and his first rookie jersey framed on the wall. He also had Shane's game schedule clipped to the magnet board in his office, which left Shane standing there like an idiot for far too long, trying to figure out how that was supposed to make him feel, and why it gave him the urge to show Ilya he had his schedule pinned on his phone.

In the end, Shane found the guest room and crawled right into bed. It was too late to do anything but be deeply grateful that Ilya was okay and fall sleep.

**

Only a few hours later, Shane was up and blending smoothies in Ilya's kitchen, trying not to make a mess while he rummaged around for all the things he couldn't find. Ilya appeared part way through the second blend.

"Hollander."

"Hey. You okay?" Shane sort of stumbled a step towards him like Ilya might suddenly collapse.

But Ilya held steady. "Fine." He shifted his right arm and winced. "You're here." He was being shorter than usual, but by the look on his face, Shane suspected it was a struggle with finding the English words rather than a particularly bad mood.

"What do you remember?"

"Hmm. Some. We lost?"

Shane snorted. "Of course you remember that."

That finally earned Shane a little smirk, making Ilya look much more like himself. "You came to the hospital," he said, frowning again as he worked through his memories. "I don't remember the game at all."

"The doctor said that'd be normal. You probably don't want to see the footage until you're feeling a lot better." *I never want to see the footage again.*

Ilya hummed noncommittally and sat down on one of the stools along his kitchen's breakfast bar. "We are going to your house?"

Shane nodded. "If you're okay with it. You're not allowed screens and you're supposed to take it easy for a few days, at least, and they want someone around who can look out for you. Obviously, everyone assumed it would be me. I don't play until the end of the week, and then we're at home for almost another week before our next roadie, but I do have practices and meetings and stuff, so I figured it'd be easier in Montreal. Unless you don't want it to be me. Which I'd understand."

"You are good," Ilya said succinctly. "There is no one else, anyway." Shane thought of Ilya's insistence that Shane not even call his family, such as they were, and felt a pang in his chest.

"Ilya…" Shane knew he should offer to help Ilya hire someone to come, offer to find a way to make him safe and comfortable here in his own home, but he couldn't deny that he didn't want to drive back home alone. Or that he wanted to see with his own two eyes that Ilya was doing okay.

"I want to go to Montreal." Ilya met Shane's eyes and smiled softly. "I want to see Shane Hollander's Cens wallpaper and sign the huge poster of me you have over your bed."

Shane laughed. "You're going to be very disappointed, then. But I can put a poster of me over the TV while I'm at practice so you have something to watch while you're alone."

"Oh, wow. I am surprised they bothered to make a poster of you since no one will buy it except you."

"I'll have you know I'm a top seller." Shane slid one of the smoothies over the counter towards Ilya, and he pouted at it.

"Can we stop at McDonalds?"

Shane sighed and pretended like he wasn't immediately going to give in.

**

An hour later, Ilya's bag was in the trunk of a Mercedes SUV rental Shane'd had delivered by calling and throwing some money around. For the first time since he got his signing bonus, Shane decided the answer to every roadblock between Ottawa and having Ilya safely and comfortably in Montreal was: *I'm rich.*

His sedan didn't have a very comfortable back seat, and he could tell by looking at Ilya that he wasn't going to last long up front. The Mercedes had a huge backseat, a trunk Ilya could reach into from the back if he needed anything, and very dark tinted windows. Shane left his car in Ilya's building's long term parking and decided he would just have Ilya drive the Mercedes back when he left Montreal, and Shane would either pay someone to bring his own car back to him or he'd… maybe buy a new one. Maybe it was time to reward himself a little for his hard work.

Maybe once Ilya could look at his laptop again, Shane would give him something to do by asking him to help him pick a car. Ilya would like that.

Right now, waiting in the doorway in a hat, dark sunglasses, and an overly large hoodie, Ilya looked like what he would like most would be a nap, so Shane threw a few pillows in the backseat and gestured Ilya in.

Ilya made it through the McDonalds drive-through and halfway through his grossly greasy breakfast sandwich before he conked out. Shane was pleased to see he'd also made it almost all the way through the smoothie Shane had made him, too.

The drive was quiet. Shane turned his radio down low to keep him engaged but not wake Ilya, and he tried his best to focus on driving and not speculate about what the next week was going to be like. He and Ilya's relationship over the past year had been…chaotic, but they'd never spent more than a single night together, and never truly alone.

This week felt like it was somehow going to be the answer to a question Shane had never intended to ask: what were they actually like together? No cameras, no Immigration Authority, no teammates, no parents. Just them. Sharing space.

Shane pulled into a gas station just after Voyageur Provincial Park, wishing Ilya was awake so he could see if he could convince him they'd named the park after the hockey team, but when he peeked in the backseat, Ilya was still asleep.

Ilya's lips were parted and his face was slack. The dark sunglasses he'd been wearing had slipped off and his long eyelashes were fanned out over his cheeks. His curls were a mess, no doubt crunchy with dried sweat since he hadn't showered since before the game last night, but Shane still found his fingers were itching to comb through them.

He wanted to kiss him.

Shane wanted to kiss Ilya and not because he wanted to comfort him, or because Ilya was the only man he was allowed to kiss or because it had been months since their night at the All Stars game. No, he wanted to kiss him because he was beautiful, and here, and phenomenally good at hockey, and adorably good with kids, and charmingly in love with dogs, and, possibly—though Shane had yet to definitively confirm it—hilariously afraid of cicadas. And he was maybe a little bit Shane's.

This sudden, wild urge flared up, and Shane had to take a step back from the car to tamp down the urge to lean over and brush Ilya's hair back and press their lips together. And that brought up a new wave of the terrifying unknown as he thought about the week they were about to spend together: how was Shane going to last a whole week without giving in and doing just that?

And: would it be so bad if he couldn't?

Chapter 12: The Couch

Shane woke up suddenly, confused, on his own couch, before remembering that Ilya was in his bed. He rolled off the couch and stretched, wincing at the pull in his neck from sleeping funny. He hadn't actually planned to nap on the couch. His apartment had a spare room, but there were no sheets on the bed and he'd laid down for "just a minute" and that was it.

They'd rolled into Montreal midday, and Ilya had stayed awake long enough to talk to about a hundred Cens admins, trainers, and coaches on the phone, sorting out his recovery care and booking appointments for evaluating his shoulder in Montreal, once he was feeling well enough for it. He'd barely been conscious by the end of all that, so Shane had directed him to his bed and started working his way through own calls, updating his parents, warning Coach, and explaining everything to Hayden. There was also something about spouses and health insurance, but he happily fobbed that off on their two team admins to sort out. Now it was almost dinnertime, and Shane suspected he'd obliterated his own sleep schedule.

He shuffled over and peeked into his bedroom to find Ilya lying with his eyes closed, but he said, "Hey," when Shane made a noise, bumping against the door jamb.

"Hey. How're you feeling?"

"Better. Everything is very bright, though."

"Oh, sorry." Shane stepped into the room and reached behind the thin curtain to pull the release for the blackout shades. They'd already been installed when he bought the place, but he liked to wake up with the sun, so he never used them. The room was plunged into darkness. "Hungry?"

"Not yet." Ilya sat up and rubbed his hand through his hair then grimaced. "I am disgusting."

"Wanna take a shower?"

"Yes."

Shane went to the bathroom to get the water heating up, and when he got back, Ilya had made it out of his hoodie but was struggling with

his t-shirt, his back to Shane. Shane grabbed the back hem and rolled it forward up and over Ilya's head and shoulders. Ilya didn't turn, standing there with the shirt in his hand, and Shane stepped around him, finding his face twisted up in pain.

"Is your shoulder really that bad?" Shane had a horrible flash of concern that despite what the doctors said, Ilya's career might really be in jeopardy.

Ilya shook his head. "Is not that bad, but—" He grimaced, visibly frustrated, then said something in Russian. After a breath, he translated. "Every time my shoulder hurts it goes in my head."

"Oh. I know what that's like." Shane couldn't stop himself from brushing his fingers over Ilya's temple. Ilya's eyes fluttered shut. "Not concussion bad, but nasty headache bad."

Ilya leaned into his touch, then hooked his good arm around Shane's neck. "Maybe I need your help to shower, Hollander." He grinned.

"You look like you're feeling better to me." Shane raised an eyebrow.

"But who will wash the spots that I cannot reach?" Ilya's attempt at an innocent expression was anything but.

"Somehow, you'll have to manage," Shane replied wryly. He grabbed Ilya's waist anyway and walked him to the bathroom, then patted him on the butt like a teammate to guide him in. He shut the door, though he left it open a crack, just in case.

Ilya reappeared twenty minutes later, dressed and somehow looking worse. There was a cut on his forehead from his helmet and a dark bruise peeked out of his t-shirt, blooming over his bad shoulder.

"Hungry?" Shane asked, for lack of anything else to offer.

"Okay."

"What do you want?"

Ilya shrugged then winced, his hand coming up to wrap around his right elbow. "Can you make tuna melts?"

Shane had never made a tuna melt before, but he'd had one once or twice and it didn't seem like it could be that hard? It was such a specific request it must be some kind of random comfort food for Ilya.

And he did want to bring him comfort. “Uh, sure, I don’t see why not,” he said, pulling up a grocery delivery app. He had been planning to order some kind of takeout, but he supposed he could just as easily order groceries. Actually, he should probably get some groceries anyway, since he had someone else living here now. Temporarily. He'd packed up what his parents had bought them but was still short on several staples.

“While I’m at it, what do you like for breakfast?”

“Pop tarts,” Ilya said, starting to smirk. “Lucky Charms.”

“Great, I heard…plain yogurt”—Shane added to the cart—“berries… granola…”

“Are you going to make me a healthy Shane breakfast to have in bed?”

“I’m going to make you tuna melts to have on the couch,” he said. “Do you have favorite brands of anything for them?”

Ilya did, and at another time Shane wondered if he would also have specific instructions on how to prepare the sandwiches. As it was, by the time the groceries came, Ilya was resting on the couch and had gone quiet. Shane did his best with some instructions he found on YouTube, placing slices of cheese carefully on top of the tuna-laden slices of bread and reacquainting himself with the settings on his toaster oven. It was weird and unsettling not to have Ilya chirping at him or crowding into his space. He’d been a menace in the kitchen at Christmas when Yuna wasn’t in charge.

Ilya blinked drowsily at Shane when he put their plates down carefully on the coffee table.

“Dinner’s ready,” he said.

“Thank you, honey,” Ilya teased, though it was a little feeble.

“I, uh, hope they’re good. I didn’t really know what I was doing.” Shane found himself oddly anxious that his attempt at making dinner for Ilya wouldn't provide the coziness it was intended to, but he hadn’t needed to worry. Ilya lit up when he saw the tuna melts, sat up, and tucked in with relish.

“Is good,” he said, chewing happily. “Maybe you should quit hockey and do this.”

Shane laughed. “Nice try.” He had to admit the tuna melts weren’t half bad, though.

“You are hiding skills,” Ilya said. “You should have Harris do a series for social media. He has some others. Bood grills. There’s one for my cars. They are fun.”

Shane put down his sandwich slowly and looked at Ilya carefully. “Ilya. I don’t play for the Centaurs.”

Ilya blinked at him. Shane could see the moment he remembered what had happened when his eyes cleared and he frowned. “Right,” he corrected. “Of course. Is joke.”

“Sure,” Shane said. Shit, he was kind of worried about him. He was glad Ilya was here where Shane could take care of him. Ilya was looking cagey, though. He didn’t want to dwell on this. Shane wouldn’t either. *Didn’t* either.

They finished their food, and Ilya seemed to brighten quite a bit, colour coming back to his cheeks and the faraway look in his eyes fading back towards his normal sharp perceptiveness, only slightly dulled by pain and exhaustion. But instead of going to sleep again, Ilya seemed in need of entertainment, if for no other reason than to distract him from the obvious soreness in his shoulder and pounding in his head.

"So, what do you want to do?" Shane asked. Normally, he'd offer to put on a movie, or something, but Ilya wasn't supposed to be looking at screens. He probably couldn't focus on much, right now, anyway, based on the way he winced at the glow from the refrigerator light and his alarming memory lapse. "I could—uh"—Shane glanced around the room—"read to you?"

Ilya laughed quietly. "One of your many hockey books?"

Shane shot Ilya a glare. "Well, what do you normally read?"

Ilya's smirk deepened and darkened. "Books in Russian," he said, exaggerating his accent, which, for some reason, made Shane blush.

"Oh, right." Shane sat on the couch, and Ilya curled up in the opposite corner, back against the arm and legs folded up on the section between them. "You should teach me Russian."

"I don't think I can teach you fast enough to read me books in

Russian."

"I didn't mean that. Just - it'd be fun. And you can teach me Russian with your eyes closed."

"Okay. One condition."

"Yeah?"

Ilya snuggled down, wrapping his arms around himself and leaning in towards the back of the couch. "Teach me French."

Shane laughed. "Yeah, okay. Uh…how do you say *book?* "

"Kuniguh," Ilya said, or something like that. Shane tried to repeat it, and Ilya chuckled.

"Don't laugh at me."

"I am not laughing at you. I laugh because you are very adorable, Shane Hollander."

Shane pouted, though Ilya had his eyes closed again by now. "I don't even know what you mean."

"What is *book* in French?"

"Livre."

Ilya repeated it a few times. "You should learn to say, 'We tried our best, but Ottawa is just a better team,' in Russian and then you'll be able to answer all hockey questions in three languages! Very impressive."

Shane smacked him lightly on the foot. "You can practice, ' *Shane Hollander est un meilleur joueur de hockey que moi.'"*

Ilya opened one eye to raise a brow at him. "I think I will look it up first."

"Wow, it's like you don't trust me."

They traded nouns in their languages for a while, trying to come up with word requests that would make the other laugh, but Ilya was slowly sliding down lower and lower on the couch, his eyes staying closed longer and longer, before he finally said, "Maybe you put on something in French and I can listen and you can tell me what is

happening."

"Sure." Shane clicked around for a bit until he found a movie he'd seen before and changed it to French dubs.

They did the same the following evening, although Shane made something healthier than tuna melts. He'd never cooked for another person before and found it surprisingly satisfying.

Ilya was clearly feeling a little better because he gave Shane more shit about the dinner being plain chicken and broccoli, then requested dubbing on an action movie, even though he still couldn't watch the screen. It became a rhythm over the following few days, with Ilya looking a little more himself each day that Shane got home from practice, tolerating more and more time on his phone or watching TV before a headache set in.

After Shane's next game, he picked up his phone in the locker room to find that Ilya had clearly been watching from home, and had texted Shane everything he'd done "wrong" from first puck drop to the buzzer.

Instead of being annoyed, Shane laughed. He liked the idea of Ilya watching him on TV, thinking about him when he wasn't there, and wondered for the first time if he usually did or if this was new. Shane often had Ilya's games on as background noise, just to keep on top of how he was doing. And, apparently, to see it in real time when his head nearly got busted open. Shane still shivered at the memory.

But now Ilya was the one on the couch, not just watching, but waiting for Shane, waiting for him to come home so they could spend the evening together. It was shocking, really, how quickly Shane was getting used to that little rhythm, how easily he tossed aside the privacy and control of having his place to himself and enjoyed sharing instead.

Shane hurried through his shower and press and changed into his suit, ignoring his teammates' plans to get drinks as he hustled out of the arena.

"Somewhere to be?" Hayden asked.

"Yup. Ilya still needs some help. Don't want to leave him alone too long." It wasn't really true. Ilya could take care of himself by now, but it was a white enough lie that Shane didn't mind telling it.

Hayden snorted. "That and if you leave him alone too long at your place he'll probably draw a little mustache on every picture of you in the house. Or a dick."

Shane paused and gave that some thought. "Yeah, that's possible. So, gotta run. Good game tonight."

"Night."

Shane pulled his phone out and started texting Ilya back all the ways he was wrong as he trotted out to his car.

**

Three days later, at the end of Ilya's first week at Shane's, Shane came home from practice to find the apartment quiet and dark in a way that felt ominous instead of cozy. He had the fleeting—almost panicky—thought that Ilya had just packed and left without saying anything, but there he was, lying face down on Shane's living room couch, doing…nothing.

"Hey," Shane said.

Ilya mumbled something incoherent, either because it was in Russian or because his face was half pressed in the pillow.

"What'd you do today?"

"Nothing," Ilya said, grumpily. "Always nothing."

Shane dumped his stuff and changed then went to the kitchen. The Ilya-lump hadn't moved. "Do you want a bagel?" Shane asked.

"No."

Shane made his own post-practice snack, then came around to sit on the end of the couch by Ilya's feet. Ilya radiated unhappiness, and Shane didn't know if this was the kind of thing he should push on or leave alone. But after a minute of Ilya sulking while Shane ate, he decided to poke gently. "You okay?" he asked.

Ilya sighed. "I am fine. It is -" His hand sort of flopped up and down again.

"How're the Cens doing?"

Ilya frowned. "They are in Washington for a few days. Winning." He

rolled onto his back. "Without me."

"That sucks," Shane offered. "Being benched is shit."

"It is. And—" Ilya cut himself off, paused, then added, "I don't like being still."

"You miss hockey?"

"No hockey, no gym, no practice. Nothing. I don't like having to stop for so long."

"Sorry. At least, it's not too much longer. You can start jogging again. You can come with me and I'll go really slowly," Shane teased and earned a little laugh.

"I feel like…what if I can't?"

Shane frowned, and his hand found Ilya's ankle on its own. When he realized what he was doing, he almost pulled it back, but Ilya pressed into the touch, his socked toes curling against Shane's thigh. "Do you mean if your injury doesn't get better?"

"No, I am not worried about that."

"What do you mean by *can't* then?"

Ilya sighed, then he pushed up a little so his back was braced against the arm of the sofa. He looked at Shane for a moment, then said, "I can get sad sometimes. Especially when I am still for too long."

"Oh." There was something about the way he said *sad* that made it clear what he meant. "That's pretty scary?"

"Yes. My mother…she got sad too." Shane felt the ominous weight of the words, and was reminded of how much he still didn't know about Ilya. But it didn't seem like he wanted to share more right now. "Ottawa helps," Ilya said unexpectedly instead. "Very modern. They have a sports psychologist on the team."

Shane was starting to wonder if there was anything they *didn't* have. At this point, he wouldn't be surprised to find out they had a team sommelier.

"That does sound helpful."

"Yes. But someday there will be no more hockey. Nothing to do."

Shane gave Ilya's ankle a squeeze. "The retired players I've talked to have said it helps to have something else, you know? So it doesn't feel too still. Something to look forward to, a hobby or something. Something you want, for after."

Finally a sweet smile curved Ilya's lips and he looked at Shane, then laughed, as if he'd made a silent joke to himself. "Yes," he said. "Is good to have something I want. For after." He blinked languidly at Shane, eyes soft but sparkling.

"I could help you, if you want. Find a hobby, or whatever."

Ilya laughed again. "Yes, please. I will try reading boring hockey books and making smoothies. Perfect retirement."

Shane smacked him lightly, releasing his ankle to do so and regretfully taking his own hand back after. Ilya flexed his toes against him.

"I will come on your very slow run tomorrow as long as it is not too early."

"Yeah, okay. Fine." Shane picked up the remote and handed it to Ilya. "You feel up to a screen for a bit?"

Ilya nodded. "Yes. Okay." He took the remote, his fingertips brushing along Shanes and sending a shiver down his spine. "I will pick."

They spent the rest of the evening on the couch together, in the low light, watching old episodes of NCIS.

**

Two days later, Ilya had an appointment for a follow up CT at a health unit in town. It was right before Shane's practice, so Shane dropped him off at the doctor's and went on to the arena. Ilya said he'd go to his physio appointment in the same building after, then take an Uber to the arena to meet Shane so they could pick up dinner and go home together.

Shane tried not to think too much about how easy it was to think of them going *home together,* especially since right now he was supposed to be thinking about receiving a pass from Volkov. He spun behind the net and pulled the puck off the boards, looking for a way to get it out in the open to Hayden. They were practicing three on three right now, a response to an overtime loss last week, and even though it wasn't a game, Shane still felt the familiar hum of adrenaline that came from a

goal within reach.

He fired the puck out to Hayden who used a single smooth motion to catch it, shoot it, and bury it in the top left corner of the net. Hayden whooped in delight, and Shane got an affectionate pat on the helmet from Volkov, and for a moment, things felt like they were supposed to on the ice. Like they had the first time he'd skated out with the Voyageurs, full of pride, before they'd stopped taking pride in him.

It was their final drill so they shifted to a cooldown skate, the other players rejoining them on the ice. Shane almost stumbled to catch a pass from J.J. but reached and took it on his stick at the last minute before hitting it up the boards to Schneider.

"Sloppy footwork," a familiar Russian accent called from the stands. When Shane looked up, he saw Ilya there, clearly done with his appointments and smirking crookedly at him from where he was sprawled in a tiny stadium seat like a king. Shane flipped him off, and Ilya laughed.

But no one else did.

"Hey, Hollander," Laurent called out. "You've got your husband coming to spy on us now?"

It could have been a chirp from anyone else, but there was an edge to it that wasn't kind, was truly suspicious, like a glance at their free skate would reveal all of Montreal's secrets. Shane started to skate over towards Ilya, but his way was abruptly blocked when Laurent and Archer skated up to Shane and stopped hard.

"What's he doing here?"

"Nothing. I'm just driving him home after," Shane said.

"Well, maybe he could do that somewhere else," Laurent snapped.

Shane ducked around them and skated to the edge of the rink, pulling up to the boards where Ilya had now walked down to meet him. "Hey."

"Hi. I am all done. Just wanted to let you know."

"Can you wait in the foyer? The guys are being…weird about it."

Ilya's gaze cut from Shane to where a growing number of his

teammates were huddled by the opposite goal, watching them. His brow furrowed. "What were they saying to you?"

"It's nothing. Don't worry about it."

"They shouldn't blam-"

"Ilya. Just go. I'll be out soon."

Ilya's eyes came back to Shane and hung there for a moment, sharp, intense, then he nodded and turned away. "I will wait by the car." And he walked out.

When Shane got out to the car, he could tell by Ilya's face that he wanted to talk about what had just happened at the rink, so Shane quickly headed him off. "What did the physio say?"

Ilya frowned but allowed the change in subject. "I am doing well. I can go home in a few days and play soon. Start in the gym at your building today if it is okay."

"Yeah," Shane said. "Yeah, of course."

"I will be back traveling with the Centaurs in time to play you." Ilya smirked at that. "Back to normal."

He was glad Ilya was doing better, of course, and that they'd be playing together again, even if it was against each other. But back to normal? Normal rivals. Normally not sharing space, and planning to divorce.

If that was normal, Shane wasn't sure how much he wanted it anymore.

Chapter 13: The First Time

Shane lay in bed for a long time, but he couldn't sleep. As soon as Ilya got back in the gym, he had seemed to instantly climb over the last hump of his recovery, and now, two days later, half his stuff was packed and in the hall. He was leaving tomorrow, going back to Ottawa, and everything was going to go back to the way it had been before. Shane wondered what he was going to do with the extra cans of tuna in his cupboard.

Eventually, he gave up on sleep and pushed out of bed, padding as quietly into the kitchen as he could so he wouldn't wake Ilya, but it turned out to be unnecessary. "Oh. Hey."

Ilya looked up from the book he was reading, its cover folded all the way over and around so he could hold it in one hand. He looked as surprised to see Shane as Shane was to see him. "Hi. You okay?"

"Couldn't sleep." Shane pulled the orange juice out of the fridge and poured a glass. "You?"

"Yeah, same."

Shane leaned over the counter opposite Ilya, who was perched on one of the bar stools. It felt easier to be honest in the late night dark, and Shane found himself able to say something he hadn't been able to say earlier. "Kinda got used to you being here. I'll miss you."

Ilya looked up sharply, his scarily perceptive eyes latching onto Shane's face. Then he smiled. "You are just glad the Cens don't have me right now. Playoffs are not that far away."

Shane shook his head, smiling. He dropped his eyes to the counter, tracing the pattern of the granite with one finger. "Ilya…"

"No, I know," Ilya said softly. "You are good nurse. I am grateful. Was very nice here." He added something else in Russian.

"That wasn't *milk* or *cat,* so I don't know what you just said," Shane joked.

"Is okay. Means nothing." Ilya set his book down and stood. "If we can't sleep, we could do something else."

"Sure." Shane rinsed his glass in the sink, and came around the counter

to where Ilya was standing. "What do you want to do?"

Ilya's eyes wandered down from Shane's eyes to his mouth then back up. "We could play the soccer video game." His voice was low and husky.

Shane couldn't look away from him. "We could," he managed to scrape out. "Or we could watch another episode of…"

"Or…"

"We could—" He just couldn't stand there anymore and pretend like they were the same people who stood in that bland courtroom and said, *I do.*

He reached out and grabbed Ilya by the front of his shirt, dragging him into a hug. He half expected Ilya to push him away, but instead, his arms came up and wrapped around Shane, his big hand cupping the back of Shane's head. It wasn't any different from hugging a teammate after a goal except that it was completely different.

When Ilya pulled back, Shane let him, then he pushed forward, rocking up on his toes to get leverage against Ilya's height, and pressed their lips together.

Ilya made a low, desperate sound and clutched Shane to him, his tongue parting Shane's lips. The kiss was curious, exploratory, looking for edges and boundaries, but Shane wasn't sure he had any. Except—

"Wait." Shane pulled back, bare inches between their faces.

Ilya stilled immediately, his tight grip relaxing so Shane could break it, but not releasing. "What? You okay?"

"Are you only doing this because you're grateful I took care of you this week? As a thank you?"

Ilya's eyes went dark. "No."

Shane let out a shaky breath. "Okay." He pulled Ilya back in and they kissed as they stumbled in the direction of Shane's bedroom.

When Ilya's hand slipped down to palm Shane's ass, he couldn't help but gasp, even though it meant breaking the kiss. There was something else he wanted beyond Ilya's lips. "I want—I want to—" Shane huffed, frustrated, because he couldn't get the words out.

Ilya kissed his way from Shane's mouth along his jaw to his ear. "What do you want?" he purred in Shane's ear, breath hot.

Shane swallowed, took a deep breath, and said, "I want you to fuck me."

Ilya *growled.*

The back of Shane's knees hit the bed, and he folded one leg up on it, then the other, so he was kneeling on the bed but still pressed up against Ilya. Ilya's hands wandered up under the back of Shane's t-shirt. "You don't need this," Ilya said.

Shane sat back on his heels and stripped his shirt off, tossing it in the hamper from the bed. Ilya grinned at that, then started peeling off his own clothes. Shane watched, transfixed, as every inch of Ilya's skin was revealed. Every time Shane got to see him this way, taut and wanting, the image worked its way deeper inside him. It was kind of intense, but Shane's arousal burned the thought away for now in favor of more immediate matters—like the way Ilya's thick cock was jutting out proudly towards Shane while he crawled up on the bed and covered Shane's body with his own.

Ilya bent and kissed him again, his mouth hot and insistent now, like it had been that day on the ice in front of the photographers. There was a depth of desire there that flushed fire through Shane's veins, made him want to do *everything,* things he didn't even know about yet. He wanted it all.

Ilya's hands went to the stretchy waistband of Shane's sleep pants and he pushed them down until Shane could kick them off, leaving them both, finally bare. They'd never touched like this before, their naked bodies fully pressed tight, mouths slotted together, one of Ilya's thighs between Shane's legs, giving him something to grind up against.

They made out for a long time, just enjoying the slow grind of skin on skin, Ilya's hot, hard cock sliding up and down Shane's stomach as they moved. Shane let his hands wander, feeling like he had free rein to touch Ilya anywhere, so he was trying to touch him everywhere.

Ilya seemed to feel similarly, the fingers of his right hand dancing down Shane's ribs to his hips while he supported his weight with his left. Shane squirmed when Ilya nearly lost his balance. "Ilya," he gasped, "your shoulder—you shouldn't—"

"Is fine. Shut up and kiss me."

Shane couldn't find a reason to argue with that. But after only a few more kisses, Ilya pulled back. "Do you have things? Lube and condoms?"

"Yeah." Shane twisted a little, stretching under Ilya to reach for the bedside drawer where he kept supplies for his private time.

Ilya's eyes narrowed. "All this time your naughty things were right there? I could have peeked!'"

"There's not much to peek at," Shane grumbled.

Ilya started to rummage around, but Shane reached out and wrapped his hand around Ilya's dick, squeezing a little then stroking once. Ilya shuddered and his arm almost gave out, nearly dropping him down to the bed. "Shane," he groaned.

"Stop rifling through my stuff and get the lube."

"You are so impatient," Ilya said, but he shuffled back to cover Shane's body with his own again, now holding a bottle of lube and a condom packet. He dropped them to the bedspread and bent to kiss Shane deeply, his left hand curling in to brush and twist through Shane's hair.

But then Ilya winced and tilted to the side, landing on the bed beside Shane. "Okay, maybe my shoulder does hurt a little."

"Oh, sorry." Shane rolled up on his side, facing him. "Do you need to stop?"

"No fucking way. Come here." Ilya hooked Shane's waist and dropped onto his back, pulling Shane into his lap at the same time, so Shane was straddling him. Ilya petted his hands up and down Shane's chest. "Mmm. Nice view down here."

Shane squirmed a little, feeling very exposed and on display. He liked it when Ilya was big and heavy over him, trapping him against the bed and making him feel pinned down like a butterfly behind glass, but being on top like this made him want to cover his face with his arms.

As if he'd sensed Shane's urge, Ilya circled both of Shane's wrists with his fingers, and whispered, as he first had so many months ago, "Don't hide." Then he drew Shane's hands to his chest.

Shane spread his fingers wide, exploring Ilya's skin, flicking a nipple with his thumb and enjoying the gasp he was given in response. But he'd done that part before. It was the next steps that still felt uncomfortably out of reach. He knew what he wanted, and he'd used toys on himself before, but he'd never done *this* before, and he didn't want to do it wrong. "What should I do now?" he asked.

Ilya picked up the lube bottle and handed it to Shane. "Get ready," he said, then he grabbed Shane by the hips and pulled him up his chest, until Ilya could wrap his lips around Shane's cock.

"Oh, fuck." Shane folded forward and had to catch himself against the headboard as that wet heat enveloped him. For several bobs of Ilya's head, Shane forgot he had a job of his own to do, rolling his hips while trying not to thrust awkwardly down Ilya's throat.

Shane flicked the lid open on the lube with the same hand that held the bottle, then slicked two fingers of his right hand. While Ilya sucked his cock, Shane—with considerable effort to focus—rubbed the pad of his finger over his rim then worked it inside. He couldn't help remembering that first blowjob Ilya had given him, sucking him down and teasing him with a finger at the same time. It was the memory that had pushed him over the edge for almost every masturbation session since then, but this was even better. He could feel Ilya's broad, strong chest caught between his thighs, Ilya's arms tight against Shane's calves and his long fingers digging into Shane's hips. God, what if he left bruises? He imagined seeing this memory imprinted on his skin and moaned, which earned him a matching sound of approval from Ilya underneath him.

Shane worked a second finger in, rougher and faster than he'd normally be, wanting to be able to take all of Ilya easily, but too eager to take his time. Ilya was sucking slowly but steadily, making it clear that this was simply a warm up and not the main event. Shane stared down at the way his cock stretched out Ilya's lips, his eyes softly closed, and his hair a messy halo around his head.

"Fuck—wait." Shane pulled back with a full body shudder, and Ilya's hands moved from his hips to his thighs.

"Okay?" Ilya's hands petted up and down seemingly automatically.

"Too good," Shane clarified. Ilya backed off and restricted himself to watching—but the way his eyes were fixed intently on Shane's body was almost as arousing as the blowjob, and it wasn't long before

Shane shuffled backwards, determined to feel Ilya inside him before he lost it completely.

Shane tried to open a condom, but his fingers were too slippery, so Ilya took it from him, ripped it open, and managed to slide it on even with Shane's body in the way. Shane reached back and stroked the rest of the lube on his hand down Ilya's cock then lined himself up. Then he hesitated.

"Go slow," Ilya said, far too gently. "I won't move."

Shane lowered himself down slowly enough that his thighs shook. He kind of felt like everything was shaking, something deep inside him shuddering through the seismic shift of knowing what it felt like to do this. With a man. With Ilya.

Ilya was rippling with tension underneath him, but he kept his promise and stayed still, his eyes closing and his mouth opening as Shane bottomed out.

"Fuck," Ilya breathed, and Shane had to bite back a whimper.

He stayed there, feeling the incredible stretch and heat of Ilya deep inside him. It was nothing like the toys Shane had tried before; he could feel how *alive* Ilya was, his cock twitching against Shane's rim. He was so full.

"Shane," Ilya groaned. "If I can't move, you have to."

Shane couldn't help feeling a thrill at the edge of desperation in Ilya's voice. It was exhilarating that he could make someone else feel like that, that his body reduced Ilya Rozanov to strained grunts and white knuckles. But he also wanted to move. So Shane pushed up on his knees and dropped down again, gasping at the way Ilya's cock rubbed against all his nerves, lighting him from the inside out. "Oh, wow."

Ilya laughed softly. "Yes. Good. Do that. More."

Ilya's hands on Shane's hips guided him up and down again, and Shane said a silent thank you to all of past-Shane's hours in the gym—apparently good for more than just hockey. It took some shifting and adjusting but they found a rhythm eventually, Ilya's feet flat on the mattress, and Shane's hands braced, one on Ilya's chest and one on the headboard, as they rocked together, the pressure building.

Ilya brought one hand to Shane's cock, letting him slide in and out of

his fist with each thrust, so sitting back drove Ilya deeper inside him and pushing forward stroked Ilya's tight grip around his dick. Shane wasn't sure how long he could last like this, skin buzzing and heart pounding, his breath coming in short gasps.

"I'm—Ilya I'm getting close," Shane said, but then he hit a peak and couldn't push over it. His legs, strong as they were, ached, and every time he tried to find that perfect angle, his grip on the headboard would slip.

Then Ilya hooked Shane's waist, and twisted, spinning him down onto his back so suddenly that Shane yelped and grabbed his shoulders. Ilya laughed and smirked down at him.

Shane glared back. "A little warning?" Ilya rolled his hips, and Shane's glare melted into pure pleasure. "Fuck."

"Warning?" Ilya asked. "Okay. Warning: I am going to make you come now."

Shane made a noise that was somewhere in the *ngghh* category and dug his nails into Ilya's back, as Ilya braced his uninjured arm on the bed, hooked under Shane's shoulders, fingers around the back of Shane's neck, and steadied himself against the mattress with his other. Shane's legs came up around his waist, and Ilya started to move.

Shane was forced to thank the gym again for letting Ilya develop a set of muscles capable of fucking Shane into the bed so hard he was starting to lose his grip on reality. The wall might have some bruises of its own to match Shane’s hips when they were done.

"Touch yourself," Ilya commanded, and Shane's cheeks heated at how eager he was to obey. He grabbed his cock and started jerking with rough, uneven strokes, desperately chasing the cliff edge Ilya had driven him right up against again.

Ilya bent and kissed Shane then bit his lower lip, licking across it after to soothe the sharp shock. His body squished Shane's hand against his stomach, but each thrust from Ilya pushed his cock through his fingers anyway, so he let himself be trapped, reveling in Ilya’s decisive weight on top of him, rolling into the movement, encouraging Ilya by bearing down on his cock.

Ilya hitched Shane's leg up a little, and the new angle was all it took. *"Oh, fuck,"* Shane whined, his body starting to shudder as he passed the point of no return. He threw his head back and squeezed his hand

around his cock as electric shocks shuddered down his spine and he came all over his stomach.

Ilya leaned back a little to watch, then tipped forward, covering Shane completely, clutching him to him with both arms now. Shane grabbed his shoulders and held on. "Can I—?" Ilya gasped out.

"Yeah. Don't stop." The sensation was entirely overwhelming, but Shane wasn't ready for it to be over yet, and he wanted to feel Ilya come.

Ilya buried his face in Shane's neck, and his rhythm changed in a way that made it clear how much he was focusing on getting Shane off before. This was all for him, and in some ways, it was even hotter to feel him let go. Shane tangled his fingers in Ilya's hair, closed his eyes, and let himself just sink into the overstimulation.

Ilya's thrusts got wilder, his breath hot against Shane's neck, and Shane gripped his hair hard enough that it had to hurt. Ilya started choking out broken Russian against Shane's skin, a stream of beautiful words that Shane wished he could know the meaning behind, and then Ilya pressed all the way inside him and gasped out his release. *"Fuck, Shane."*

Shane didn't lessen his grip as they lay there together, Ilya still buried deep inside him, their breathing slowly returning to normal. Shane closed his eyes and squeezed Ilya to him once more before relaxing, releasing him, and Ilya pushed himself up on his elbows. His eyes searched Shane's face, and Shane offered him a smile, even though there was a sudden knot in his chest.

"Okay?" Ilya asked, and Shane nodded.

"Great." Shane waited until Ilya rolled off him then sat up, wiping his sweaty hair off his brow. He busied himself with cleaning himself off with the nearest item of discarded clothing and putting the lube bottle back in the drawer while Ilya tossed the condom in the trash and pulled his boxers back on.

Ilya made a satisfied noise and flopped back down again.

"I should—uh—go to bed, I guess." Shane kicked his leg over the edge of the bed, preparing to leave his own room and go back to the guest room. He'd have to make sure to wash these sheets as soon as Ilya left, because if he went to bed tomorrow night smelling Ilya on them…

"Don't be stupid," Ilya mumbled. "Is your bed. Come here."

Shane lay back down without further argument, letting Ilya wrap himself around him like a giant python. There was a long moment of silence, but Shane's mind wouldn't settle, so before Ilya could fall asleep, he said, "Thanks."

"For what?"

"Um. For this? For showing me how to…do things. All year, really. It was nice of you."

"Oh," Ilya said flatly. "Yeah. Well. Is fun for me too." He shifted a little on the bed so they weren't quite as entangled. Things fell silent again, then Ilya cleared his throat. "I got a lawyer who does…divorce stuff."

And that should have felt like a flush of relief instead of a stab to the heart. "Oh, good." The words both of them expected him to say felt like they stuck in his throat on the way out.

Ilya's free hand came up to fiddle with the chain of his necklace. "They are good. It will be fast. Simple."

Shane couldn't help a wry chuckle. Nothing about this was going to be fast *or* simple, because it wasn't the signing of the paperwork that was going to be a nightmare, it was everything else that would suck. "Good," Shane repeated, unable to come up with another word.

"So, you will be free soon to practice what I taught you on someone else," Ilya said with a laugh. "But make sure you tell them I was here first, yeah?"

Shane couldn't imagine being like this with someone else. Or at least, if he was with someone else, it wouldn't be like this. He forced out a joke. "You planting a flag in my ass, Rozanov?"

Ilya's fingers curled around the back of Shane's thigh and despite how tired he was, it made him flare with heat. "I could plant something else…"

Shane squirmed away with a mock huff, knowing neither of them had the energy for a second round. He turned on his other side and backed up against Ilya, realizing too late he was effectively making himself the little spoon. "Go to sleep."

Ilya draped over him, pulling Shane into the curve of his body.

"Okay."

And Shane could swear he felt Ilya's lips press lightly to the back of his neck before sleep claimed them both.

Chapter 14: The Boiling Point

April, 2012 – Ottawa, ON

“I wonder what they’re talking about,” the Montreal fan said while Shane signed a souvenir puck pre-game. It was their final away game before playoffs started, and both teams would already be going to the playoffs, so despite the rivalry, the atmosphere was reasonably relaxed. This game would only count for bragging rights and some individual points. Some of the players who’d been on previous teams together, or gotten to know each other because of Shane and Ilya, were chatting good-naturedly as they warmed up. Ilya was chatting too, with one of Shane’s teammates, but it didn’t look good-natured. That must have been what the fan was referencing.

“Um,” Shane said distractedly. “Yeah, me too.” He smiled at her and tried to laugh it off as she showed her puck to her friends, then Shane skated towards Ilya and Schneider. Ilya was big, but the burly Montreal defenseman still dwarfed him. Shane couldn’t hear what they were saying, but Ilya looked furious; Schneider looked as calm as ever, but Shane knew that could be deceiving. Also, he’d seen even the nicest players he knew get annoyed enough by Ilya to punch him in the face. His husband had a way about him. For a second, it looked like things might go that way, but then Schneider said something and Ilya just… *looked* as if he’d been hit. His face showed hurt and shock like Shane hadn’t seen before, but then his eyes went cold and Shane got to them just in time.

“Hey,” he said. “Let’s break it up, the kids are watching.”

Schneider gave him a long look, but then nodded and turned to go. “Think about it,” he said to Ilya, whose jaw clenched.

"Your *teammate* needs to lose a few teeth," Ilya snapped.

“I don’t need you fighting my battles, Ilya,” Shane said, stepping close so they couldn’t be overheard. He could smell his own body wash, an echo of sleepy mornings at Shane’s home. Had Ilya switched brands? He stepped back a little, trying to release himself from the inconvenient pull of memory.

“I know,” Ilya said. “This battle, I think, is mine.” The look of hurt crossed his face again, so quickly that if Shane hadn’t been staring right at it he never would have noticed. It looked so wrong to see him

that way. What the fuck had Schneider said?

But the buzzer sounded. Warmup was over, and any answers were going to have to wait.

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“What did you say to Ilya, Schneider?” Shane asked, riding high on the confidence of two goals and an assist as he stalked up to his enormous teammate after the game. “Don’t keep talking behind my back. You all owe me that much.”

“We don’t owe you shit,” Archer said, stepping away from his cubby and towards them. Shane stood his ground.

“Tell that to the scoreboard,” Shane snapped. “Or do you ignore it because you’re never on it?”

“I said that if he actually cares about you he’d let you go.” Schneider’s voice was quiet and calm and all the worse for it. “That he’s ruining your career.”

Shane stared at him in shock. His face probably looked a lot like Ilya’s had. And then he felt the rage. “What’s *ruining my career* is that my team doesn’t have my back!”

Laurent pulled his towel off his shoulders and threw it behind him into his stall. His hair was wild and curly like Ilya’s, but instead of it making him look like an avenging angel, it gave him an edge of chaos that Shane didn’t know if he could successfully meet head on. He realized he was sizing him up. This was what it was going to come to, he understood now, like bullies in a schoolyard. After all this, this was how it was going to end.

“Fuck this,” Laurent snarled. “You don’t want us talking behind your back? Fine. Schneid should have told Rozanov to take you with him. Rid us of your dead weight, you fa–”

Shane had never punched someone in the face off the ice before. It hurt, maybe because he really went for it, with enough strength to hear–and feel, ugh–the crunch of Laurent’s nose under his knuckles before his face spurted with blood. It was the only hit he got in before Laurent was on him. J.J. threw himself on Laurent’s back and managed to restrain his arm, but Hayden wasn’t quick enough on

Archer and he got to Shane.

Shane abruptly realized he had never been punched like this himself off-ice before either, without the adrenaline of the game. Getting a shiner hurt too, but not as much as the horrible truth of the situation: this team's issue wasn't with Ilya, it was with him, and it wasn't going away.

The rest of the team had pulled everyone apart by now, and Shane let himself be handled with increasing numbness. When he blinked his shining eyes clear, he realized that the arm around his shoulders was Hayden's. He looked worried, and angry. There was nothing for Shane to say to make either of them feel better.

"I'm going to—" he said, before he pushed off his best friend and walked back out into the tunnel. He leaned against the wall for a long time, listening to the arena empty on one side, and the locker room empty on the other. He was sick of this. He was sick of trying to be a leader on a team that hated him, he was furious that the reason they hated him was so disgusting, and he was tired of fighting this all on his own. He didn't want to have to. He just wanted to play hockey. He was a fucking good hockey player; that should be enough.

Eventually, he pushed up to his feet and shuffled back to the now-empty locker room. He threw the last of his stuff in his bag and shrugged into his suit. His phone pinged, and then again; a quick glance revealed several texts from Hayden and J.J. He just sent them a quick "later" without reading them. It was enough to try to deal with his own feelings right now without worrying about anyone else's. When he glanced in the mirror on the way out he could already see an ugly bruise blooming under his eye.

"Fuck," he breathed. He just wanted—

He didn't even know. He wanted to get out of here. He threw his bag in the back of his car and pulled out of the arena parking lot. The rest of the guys were probably going to the hotel bar to get drunk and that was the last place Shane wanted to go. Luckily, he had a key to his parents' house and he could let himself in even if they were asleep.

But when he pulled out onto the street, instead of going right towards his parents', he turned left. He refused to let himself think about why, but seven minutes later, he was pulling up in front of Ilya's building.

He parked in the visitor lot and found the back door to the building was propped open. He took the elevator to the ninth floor and shuffled

down the hall to 908. Ilya probably wasn't even home, he thought, as he watched his fist knocking on the door. He was probably out with his team, his team that actually liked him and didn't care who he was married to, mourning their loss together.

And then the door opened.

Ilya was wearing nothing but sweatpants, his hair a mess, blinking like Shane had woken him up or maybe he'd been watching TV in the dark. "Hi," Shane said, and then he didn't know what else to say.

Ilya frowned at the dark bruise blooming under Shane's eye. He reached out and ran his thumb under it, making Shane drop his gaze to the carpet. Then Ilya gripped the shoulder of his jacket and dragged him inside.

"I'm fucking sick of it," Shane said, kicking his shoes off next to Ilya's coat hooks.

Ilya nodded. "Yes. I know." He pushed Shane's jacket off his shoulders and hung it up. "Let's go to bed."

Apparently, it was that simple. Ilya didn't make Shane figure out what it was he wanted or beg for what he needed, he just knew what to do. "Okay."

Shane shed the rest of his suit in Ilya's bedroom, letting Ilya dump it in a pile on a chair even though he wanted to fold it. He was too fed up, too tired. Ilya grabbed him and tumbled him into bed, wrapping around him so they were on their sides, facing each other, Ilya's two arms somehow managing to completely surround Shane.

They should probably talk…or something, Shane thought. Something had changed since Ilya's concussion, and they needed to figure out what. But sleep was already dragging him under and Ilya's bed was warm and quiet and safe and he just let his eyes close.

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Shane woke up early the next morning and his cheek throbbed painfully, but he felt steadier, less despairing. He lay in Ilya's bed, Ilya breathing softly beside him, and thought.

If Montreal didn't want him, they could get rid of him. There was no

way the organization hadn't noticed the animosity between Shane and his teammates, and as good a player as Shane was, that wasn't good for the team. So if Shane requested a trade, they might be relieved to offer it to him, and they could bring in someone who wouldn't shake things up merely by being gay and existing. Shane would miss his handful of friends, but other than that, almost anywhere else in the NHL would be better in a lot of ways. He realized he'd meant it when he'd told Schneider that it was his team's shitty attitude that was holding Shane back, not Ilya.

He looked over at Ilya. Every team but one would be farther away from him, too. Would Ilya be relieved? It would mean less time spent convincing everyone they were really in love. It would mean when the inevitable divorce finally came through, maybe there wouldn't be as much attention on them, especially if they were in different conferences. And then maybe Shane wouldn't have to spend any more time trying to figure out what on earth he wanted, why he was even in Ilya's bed right now.

"You are very loud at thinking," Ilya grumbled, and Shane chuckled. Ilya's eyes blinked open and he yawned. "What are you thinking about?"

"I think—I think I need to request a trade."

That had Ilya sitting up, surprised. "Really? I mean, yes, I think Montreal does not treat you right. You should be on a good team that wants you there."

Shane's cheeks heated and he picked at a loose thread on Ilya's duvet. "Yeah. You're right."

Ilya was quiet for a long time, and when Shane glanced at him, he looked unexpectedly sad, and Shane couldn't think why. All Shane seemed to do lately was make Ilya look sad. When Ilya noticed Shane looking, he smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Where will you go?"

Shane shrugged. "I don't know. Depends who wants me."

"Everyone will want you," Ilya said with confidence. "Only one they could want more is me."

Shane laughed and flopped back on the bed on his back. "Yeah, I don't know. Where should I go?"

Ilya hummed thoughtfully. "There is a rumor Columbus is looking to

trade Pierce. Not a bad front line to join. On the other hand, is crazy to trade Pierce, so management there might be…" He waggled his hand in the air in the universal sign for *iffy,* making Shane laugh even as he tried not to think about how far and foreign Columbus sounded. "Buffalo is underrated, I think," Ilya continued speculatively. "Maybe would do well with you like Ottawa did with me. Not so far away." His eyes slid over to Shane and then away. Was he thinking of Shane's family, or could he mean himself? Or maybe both?

"Scott Hunter said I should come to the Admirals," he said, to defuse the sudden confusion of the moment. As he'd expected, Ilya gasped theatrically.

"You wouldn't. Such betrayal. Besides, they won't give anything Montreal wants."

The words sat heavy between them. He hadn't mentioned Ottawa, but he hadn't had to. They wouldn't give up any of their star players for Shane any more than the Admirals would. The most they had to offer were draft picks, though they had some good ones. If Shane could even let himself consider the implications of Ottawa.

"I guess," he finally said. "I'll have to think about it."

"Mmm," Ilya hummed. "Maybe in the morning."

"It *is* morning. I will never understand how you managed to become a professional athlete."

"Raw talent," Ilya said.

Shane snorted. "Can I borrow something to run in?" His bag had other clothes in it, but he'd left it in his car and he didn't feel like putting his suit on just to go to the parking lot.

Ilya flopped back down and made a vague, affirmative grunt and gestured towards his closet. Spontaneously, Shane bent over and smacked one of the obnoxious kisses Ilya always gave him when they were around other people to Ilya's cheek, making him laugh.

In a hoodie and a pair of Ilya's sweatpants rolled over an embarrassing number of times, Shane hit the street, enjoying the stretch and burn as he flew down the empty, early-morning sidewalk. The morning's revelations and new worries were clamoring for attention but he tried to push them back by focusing on the sure things, the peace he always found in the way his body moved, even if it was a temporary truce.

Shane circled Ilya's building at a walk, chest heaving as he regained his breath, then he took the stairs up to the ninth floor to cool down. He slipped in the front door and heard the heavy hum of Ilya's stationary bike from the gym. Shane opened his mouth to call out that he was back, when he heard Troy Barrett's voice coming through a phone.

"Well, the Voyageurs are a bunch of assholes. Hollander should leave."

"I think he wants to," Ilya replied. "I want him to."

Shane was pinned to the spot, unable to miss this rare glimpse into Ilya's thoughts.

"He should come to Ottawa. I wouldn't mind his slapshot on our side for once. Could you imagine him on our line, or Haasy's? On the Power Play? And LaPointe is closer to retirement than anyone knows. We could use another center."

Ilya laughed softly. "I wish."

"You just want your hubs in the same city as you," Troy teased.

That got another laugh. "That is true—"

And, Shane thought, he had to say that, to keep up the lie, though he was honestly surprised Ilya hadn't told Troy the truth, the way he'd told Hayden.

"—but I also really fucking want to win the Cup. And we could do that with Shane on the Cens. Is a good team already. He would make it even better."

"No argument from me."

Shane forced himself to move away. He walked past the gym and peeked in to see Ilya pedaling hard on the bike with his phone propped up on the dash and Troy on a video call. He couldn't tell if Troy had seen him, but if he had, it was all for the best, to keep up appearances. Of course Shane was at his husband's apartment on one of the rare days they were in the same city. Shane left Ilya to his call, stripped his clothes off—Ilya's clothes—and walked straight into the shower.

Shane stood under the hot water and closed his eyes, letting it pound down over him. Ilya had really nice water pressure, and, for a while,

Shane just let himself enjoy that. But eventually, he had to face the anxiety that was writhing in his stomach.

There were so many reasons to ask for a trade to Ottawa as his first choice. It was Shane's hometown team; he'd dreamed of playing for them his whole childhood. His parents were here. The Cens were a kind, accepting team, who had already proved time and time again that they would stand up for both Ilya and Shane—and people like them—in public and in private.

And Ilya.

Ilya was the most pressing reason *not* to ask for Ottawa, to ask for any team *but* Ottawa. Because, this summer, once Ilya finished working out his paperwork, they were going to start finalizing their divorce, and by next season, they'd be publicly split up.

Then, surely, it'd be agony to be a Centaur, playing with his ex, forced to replay their divorce for every press outlet at every single game for probably the entire season, maybe more than one.

And it wasn't just about the way they presented things to the public. Shane and Ilya would have to go back to the way things were before their marriage. Ilya would start dating again, or at least hooking up. Shane would have to see him at team celebrations with someone new on his arm, watch him fall in love for real. Mornings like this wouldn't happen anymore and neither would nights like last night. If Shane ever managed to work up the courage to ask for something physical like the night before he moved back out of Shane's apartment, Ilya would probably oblige, but it wouldn't mean anything. They would never mean anything, and Shane would be reminded of it at every game, every practice, every team meeting, every time he saw the Rozanov nameplate in the locker room next to his.

But Ilya had said he wanted Shane there. Not just to keep up the appearance of their relationship, which Ilya knew was going to be over soon, but because he wanted them to play hockey together, and that was an allure that was really, really hard to deny.

And if Ilya wanted Shane there…maybe…maybe it meant he liked him enough that they could keep being friends like this. Maybe he'd be willing to wait on the divorce for a while, at least until Shane was settled on the new team.

Or maybe…

Maybe Shane would be able to ask Ilya if he wanted something more, something real, and maybe there was a chance Ilya would say yes.

Shane leaned forward and smacked the water off, heart pounding. It was almost too crazy to acknowledge, but running away to another conference was rapidly losing its shine. If he went to Ottawa and things didn't work out, at least he could say he tried, at least he would have worn a Cens jersey, even if not for long, and at least, for a brief time, he and Ilya would share ice and find that electricity that had crackled between them at the All Stars game. And if Ottawa couldn't take him, there were other teams in the Atlantic Division that weren't all that far—Buffalo, like Ilya had said, or even Detroit. Other chances to hold onto more of the good things in his life as he walked away from the bad.

He toweled off quickly, threw on a different pair of Ilya's sweatpants, and called Farah on video.

"Shane! I'm glad you called. I have something to ask you."

"Oh—uh—" Shane's barreling train of thought derailed, but he nodded. "Sure."

"Sportsnet is doing a series of pieces on NHL players during their downtime and they want to do a piece on you and Ilya and your marriage. They said it might be nice to film after the playoffs, at your summer home. It would only be one day they'd be out there, and they'd pose you guys all cute in front of the lake and ask stuff like who cooks and who cleans and why you like kayaks and yoga. And each other. I think it'd go a long way towards bringing in some people who are on the fence about you two. Show that you're not just this crazy story of a rivalry turned romance, but a normal, cute couple off the ice too."

"Oh, uh, yeah. I'll ask Ilya." Shane wondered if they got divorced before it came out, if the network would just quietly cancel their episode.

"Good!" She shuffled a few papers on her desk. "What can I help you with, then?"

Shane took a steadying breath. "If…If I wanted to leave Montreal, what would my options be?"

Farah didn't look surprised, only sad, and it ached that Shane's lack of fitting in with the Voyageurs seemed to be obvious to absolutely

everyone. "Well, you could request a trade, and if they wanted to, they could grant that. Nothing in your contract prevents a mutually agreed upon trade. Where would you want to go?"

Shane chewed his lip. Could he admit what he was starting to think he wanted out loud? He was going to have to, at some point. "I don't know…I haven't decided anything yet."

Farah's voice dropped lower, softer. "Shane, it's okay for you to say you want to go to Ottawa. Obviously, I can't guarantee that'll happen. Even if the Centaurs want you they might not be able to afford you, they might not have anything Montreal wants, they might not have space for you, or they might not want to complicate things by having a relationship on the team. But you're allowed to ask."

"It doesn't feel like the right choice."

"Why not?"

Shane sighed and looked away, out the window, while he struggled through putting into words why it felt, not just risky, but wrong. "If Ilya and I have relationship issues, I don't want them to affect us on the ice."

"That's fair," Farah agreed, but she sounded unconvinced. "Has that been a problem before?"

"No," Shane had to admit. "We both love hockey too much for that, to be honest. But we've never been on the same team for more than a game."

"I get the feeling that's not what's holding you back the most," she prodded gently.

"I—Okay, it would be amazing to play with Ilya. And I think we could win. A lot. And I love Ottawa, and it would be awesome for my parents to be able to come to every home game. But it feels…"

"Yes?"

"Too easy." Shane shrugged. "It doesn't seem possible that I could just get everything I want just like that." To the point where he couldn't imagine just waiting every day for it to suddenly end. And what he wanted now could just as easily become everything he didn't want if Ilya rejected him completely once he no longer needed to be Shane's husband.

"You've worked really hard all your life," Farah said. "You gave up mornings and evenings and weekends. You lost friends. You missed fun things other kids got to do. You competed with the best in the whole world and you won and you've kept competing and kept pushing yourself. Does that really feel too easy? Maybe you've earned this." She paused, offering him a soft smile. "If it gets out that Montreal wants to shift you, my phone is going to blow up. It's not going to be hard for you to find another team, Shane. And I can't tell you which offers will end up on the table for real, but I can tell you that your shortlist of places you want me to advocate for can be for any reason you want, whether that's playing with your husband or *not* playing with your husband. But you shouldn't leave a team off just because it feels too much like a happy ending, okay?"

"Okay. Thank you." Shane's eyes were suddenly very hot.

"Think about it and text me. I won't talk to anyone until you've decided and then I'll start putting out feelers."

"Alright." Shane let out a slow breath. "Sounds good." Shane hung up with Farah, then went back to the gym, to find Ilya off the phone and cooling down.

"How many miles did you do?" Ilya asked with a smirk.

"I was on foot, in the slushy roads, wearing your giraffe-length pants, and you're on a *bike* in your temperature-controlled apartment."

"So, not very many then."

"You're such a dick."

"I heard you talking. Was that your agent?"

Shane nodded. "I haven't decided anything yet, but I gave her a heads-up."

"Okay."

Shane shuffled in place. "I should go."

"Yes." Ilya stopped the bike and swung his leg over it, perched on the seat, watching Shane. "Though…I have an air hockey table."

And Shane knew he had stuff he had to do. He had to go down and get his own clothes and get dressed, drive back to Montreal in time to

do two loads of laundry before catching a flight to Boston. He had to review video from last night and plan for the playoffs. But instead, he said, "Yeah, okay." and followed Ilya to his living room.

Chapter 15: The Lake House

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May, 2012 – Algonquin, ON

Neither team made it farther than the first round of playoffs, the Cens surviving one game longer before getting kicked out by the Guardians. The Voyageurs played like shit, which was starting to be standard for them. Shane could tell that even if he hadn't called Farah and told her to start reaching out, that Montreal would be doing it on their own. They didn't want him there. His skill on the ice wasn't worth anything if his teammates refused to acknowledge he even existed, at best, and started fights in the locker room with him, at worst. If there was any hope that time would improve things, it had proved the opposite instead. As much as he'd miss Hayden and J.J., Shane was ready to go.

The only remaining question was where he'd end up. He had texted Farah after their conversation, and some more thought. ***I want to go to Ottawa,*** he'd said. ***I want to try.***

What he wanted to try, exactly, he'd decided to save for after the playoffs. He'd never had his future feel so uncertain before, not since the day he'd first strapped on skates. But there were a lot of certain things to hold onto, too. His parents would always be in his corner. Nothing would ever stop him from loving hockey. He was gay, and had made it through coming out, and still had some good friends to show for it. And he could envision a real, immediate future with a man…though that was where things started to get uncertain again.

By some silent agreement, Ilya and Shane hadn't talked much during the last few weeks. No one else seemed to think it was weird; everyone had their playoff rituals, and for a lot of them it meant no sex or staying in their little bubbles and closing everyone else out. Hiding in while their beards grew out, focused on nothing but hockey.

That worked for Shane. He was still in turmoil over the last morning they'd spent together at Ilya's apartment: the conversation he'd overheard where Ilya revealed he at least wanted to play with Shane, the sound of him cackling over his air hockey victory, the way Ilya had made him a smoothie with all his favorite things like he'd been

waiting for Shane to drop by, even if he'd made a face while the blender whirred. The feeling of Ilya's arms around him when he'd hugged him goodbye for a little too long.

Well, the bubble had popped now, and Shane was going to have to do…something.

The documentary people want to know when we're getting to the cottage, he texted Ilya. ***I'm here already and I was thinking you could come next week. Are you still okay with doing that? We can take a couple of days to get ready and then film?***

He didn't hear back from Ilya until he got out of the shower.

Yes, the reply said. ***Good timing. I got the divorce papers this week. We can do them together.***

Great. Apparently the *something* Shane would be doing was finally getting divorced.

And then we can watch Scott Hunter get knocked out of playoffs, Ilya added and Shane smiled in spite of himself.

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"Wow, what a location." The lead documentary filmmaker, Morgan, inhaled luxuriously when he got out of the car. "I can certainly see why you spend the off season here." He smiled warmly, and Shane hoped he returned it with reasonable friendliness. Shane had talked to him on the phone a couple of times for coordination, and his assurances that he was looking forward to getting to know 'the real them' had done little to quell Shane's nerves.

Ilya's unusually subdued arrival two days ago hadn't helped either. Shane could tell both of them were putting in an effort to prepare—to show the world something good no matter how this ended—but with Ilya back in his space, the increasingly-unwanted end loomed large.

"We are icons," Ilya had said firmly after dinner the night before. "We will be iconic."

As Ilya jogged towards them with long, loping strides, Shane felt like he was about to find out what that meant.

“Is beautiful, yes?” Ilya called. “Best place in the world.”

“I already want to move in.” That came from Kate, one of the crew, who was loading gear out of the car. “Is this a private dock?”

“Yeah,” Shane said. “We’ve got some paddleboards, kayaks, jet skis. Nice to get some privacy during the summer.”

“And sometimes Shane does yoga here in the morning,” Ilya added. Shane looked at him in surprise. Ilya had only been here a couple of days and he hadn’t thought he’d been awake during Shane’s morning practice. “He is very flexible,” Ilya added, with a suggestive smirk that added a layer to the words.

Morgan either didn’t notice, or ignored it. He was probably going to have to be good at that today. “It would be great to get a shot of that, Shane. Maybe the kayaking, too. No yoga for you?” he asked Ilya.

“No,” Ilya laughed. “But if my flexible husband wants to come back to bed after, I am always happy to—“

“This is supposed to be family friendly,” Shane interjected.

“Does not have to be.”

“Well, it does,” Kate said, sounding almost apologetic about it. “But we’ll edit it in post.”

“Get ready to cut half your footage,” Shane mumbled as Ilya gleefully started to give the tour Shane had given him less than forty-eight hours ago…with some embellishments. Shane didn’t remember describing his practice rink as ‘the heart of the home’ or alluding to the extra bedrooms being perfect for what sounded like a planned fleet of dogs. He definitely hadn’t said that his large trunk of camping gear was full of sex toys—and the documentary team would have to edit that out, also because they were laughing over the footage.

The footage of Shane crushing Ilya at pool would be cute, once they cut out Ilya’s multiple references to ‘bending over the table.' Hopefully, they’d also cut out what Shane was sure was a look of complete infatuation on his face when Ilya wiggled his ass ridiculously before a shot. Or maybe not. This was supposed to be about how cute and in love they were, after all, so it was…mostly okay…that Shane definitely looked it.

He knew they’d keep everything they filmed in the kitchen. “This is all

Shane's design," Ilya said magnanimously, like everything in the rest of the house wasn't. "He is the better cook. I can only make tuna melts and his gross smoothies. But"—he leaned in conspiratorially and Shane could imagine future home viewers leaning towards their screens—"I am learning. Shane's dad is teaching me how to make chicken parmigiana." The Italian word rolled tantalizingly through Ilya's accent. Fuck, he should get a parmesan sponsorship. It momentarily distracted Shane from the news that apparently his dad was teaching Ilya to cook, which was…

"Is there something special about that dish?" Morgan asked from behind the camera. "Old family recipe?"

"Shane's dad made it to impress Shane's mom, Yuna. Now I will make it to impress Shane," he said proudly.

Shane was speechless for a moment. On the one hand, he knew Ilya was hamming it up today. On the other hand, well, that was true about his dad's chicken parm.

"You do impress me," Shane said quietly, offering a truth in return. He was rewarded with something soft in Ilya's eyes that he hoped was really, miraculously, true as well.

They had them cook together a little, mostly for show, chopping vegetables and making sauce for a simple recipe from Shane's mom. If this did air, it would probably be the first time anyone had watched NHL players prepare Japanese food on TV, and Shane thought that would be cool. They also worked out together, of course, providing a montage worthy of a documentary about two pro athletes. Thankfully, Ilya's suggestion that they deadlift each other was rejected because Shane wasn't sure he could, and he also wasn't sure his body wouldn't have an embarrassing response to Ilya using it like a barbell.

Their final shot was of the two of them snuggled on the couch under a blanket—a little warm for the late spring day but definitely adorable—with a bowl of popcorn, arguing over the remote when Shane tried to put on the curling championships.

"We're supporting our sister ice sport," Shane said, as Ilya scrabbled for the remote and the bowl of popcorn teetered dangerously.

"If we are going to watch a boring thing, then I get to take them into the bedroom."

"They won't be able to air anything you say."

“But people will *wonder*. More interesting.”

Shane saw Ilya’s body signal his lunge like a coming slapshot. He was quick enough to move the remote, but not to save the popcorn, which spilled all over them. He couldn’t help it. He started to laugh. The footage of them throwing popcorn at each other while Ilya got tangled in the blanket would either make the shoot or make them look like kindergarteners.

“Definitely makes it,” Kate assured him as the crew packed up. “The candid shots are the best. Like the Pride shoot you did for CCM. I know all anyone talks about is the kiss, and yeah, wow, but it’s the candid shots that really made us excited to tell your story. Morgan texted me after just, like, ‘that’s love.’”

“Oh,” Shane said. Candid shots? He didn’t even know what she was talking about. “Thanks, that’s really nice. We appreciate you coming out today.”

“It was fun,” Morgan said, coming up to join them with Ilya close behind. “Our pleasure.”

“Leave the good stuff in,” Ilya said. “Make us look sexy.”

“No promises.”

Shane thought they probably looked sexy just existing together, like they had for the CCM shoot. Which apparently had released photos he hadn’t seen.

That afternoon, safely alone in his room while Ilya showered, Shane took out his laptop and googled: *Hollander Rozanov CCM photoshoot.* From what he could see, the full ad campaign was set to release in June, for Pride Month, but a bunch of the photos had already been released in an online magazine article about the photography team and the message they were sending with their work.

The first few were as Shane expected: getting dressed, hockey, more hockey, a fake check against the corner boards.

And then the kiss.

Shane thought it would be a shock to see him and Ilya like that again, that the electricity of the kiss would be overwhelming all over again, but it wasn't that one that drew his attention. He'd barely glanced at it before his gaze was pulled down to a smaller shot in the corner and

then he couldn't stop looking.

It was a candid shot, one he hadn't even known the photographer had taken. Shane clicked it to open the image larger. He and Ilya were on the ice, helmets off, just before the kiss shot. Shane's cheeks were pink but it looked like it was from the cold of the arena and not because he was mortified by the whole exercise. Shane was looking at the net, a cocky smirk on his face, and he could sort of remember chirping Ilya about a shot he'd missed earlier when they were filming that stuff.

And Ilya was looking at Shane.

At first, Shane argued to himself that the photographer was just that good, to capture a moment where it looked like something it wasn't, but he was hard pressed to think of another reason why Ilya would look at him that way. Shane had thought the tabloid pictures of Ilya and Svetlana had been charged, but in this shot, there was something in Ilya's face Shane had seen plenty of times before but had never asked himself what it meant until now, until looking at it caught on film, from the outside.

He was *gazing* at Shane; there was really no other word for it. His eyes were soft and his trademark smirk had a tender curl to it, that now that Shane thought about it, had been there for a while. His whole body leaned towards Shane, like he wanted to tilt forward and fall on top of him right there on the ice. It wasn't lust—Shane knew what a lustful Ilya looked like—but it *was* desire.

The shocking part was how *familiar* that look was. When did that change and how did Shane not notice? It was like when he closed his eyes and pictured Ilya, all he could see was his head on a pillow beside Shane's, gazing over him, with this look in his eyes. But it hadn't always been that way, had it?

And no matter when it had started, what did it mean? Did it matter? They were about to get a divorce, Ilya had the papers in his suitcase, it was what he wanted. Right? It was their only option. None of this was real.

"Shane?" Ilya called from the hall, and Shane snapped his laptop shut. He all but tumbled off the bed.

"Here." Shane slipped into the hall and shut his door behind him, as if he could close what he'd been thinking about behind it as well. "What?"

"You want dinner?" Ilya tousled his damp hair with one hand, shaking the curls out. "We could try and learn how to cook something crazy on YouTube."

"I'm not sure I have enough fire extinguishers for that, but sure."

Shane watched Ilya extra closely all through cooking—a disaster—and eating—back-up sandwiches—as if he could somehow read Ilya's mind, or answer all his questions with the way Ilya's lips quirked up when he told a joke.

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"We should swim," Ilya announced, the next morning, leaning over the railing and looking out at the lake.

"Swim? It's May. It's going to be ice cold," Shane said. He set his empty coffee cup down.

Ilya smirked at him. "I thought you were a Canadian boy."

"Yeah, I am. So I have a healthy respect for fucking spring. Which isn't over for another month." Shane pushed up from the table. It was warm now, but he knew it took weeks for the sun's heat to penetrate the water's surface.

Ilya sauntered closer. "Is Hollander a chicken?"

"Hypothermia is a real thing, *Rozanov."* Shane backed up, keeping space between them.

"Is refreshing."

"It's frigid."

"Look how nice the water is. And no one around for a long way. You don't even need to change." Ilya kept advancing.

"Ilya, don't you fucking dare— *Ah!"* Shane screeched as Ilya scooped him up and threw him over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. "Put me down!" Shane struggled, but Ilya hung on, cackling as he marched across the grass towards the dock. Shane could probably dislodge himself if he really tried, but it would bring them both to the ground and possibly get one or both of them hurt.

"Swimming is good exercise, Hollander!" Ilya declared over the sound of Shane's protests.

"Fuck you!" Shane kicked out, trying to wiggle out of Ilya's grip as he stomped onto the dock.

Ilya stopped at the end of the dock, and Shane braced for being dumped in the water, but instead, Ilya let Shane slide back down to his feet so they stood there, close together. "Swim with me," he said, and he was asking this time.

Shane steadied himself against Ilya's chest with both hands. "It's really fucking cold, Ilya."

Ilya stripped off his t-shirt and tossed it on the dock, then unhooked the chain around his neck and added it on top. He waggled his eyebrows at Shane, then spun on his heel and ran off the end of the dock into the water. Ilya disappeared for a moment, and Shane double checked his phone was in his pocket so he could call 9-1-1 if he didn't reappear. But he did, spluttering and shaking his head.

"Fuck, that's cold."

Shane laughed. "I told you."

Ilya winked at him. "Is nice."

"Bullshit."

"Come in."

Shane sighed, but he stripped down to his boxers and dropped his clothes on top of Ilya's. He crouched at the end of the dock. "I'm going to regret this so much."

Ilya reached up and grabbed Shane's wrist and pulled.

Twenty minutes later, despite a raucous game of 'shove each other underwater,' Shane was shivering, and he told Ilya he'd had enough and paddled over to the dock. He pulled himself up and turned around to sit on the end. When he looked up, brushing water out of his eyes, Ilya was floating a few feet away, watching him. His eyes had that bright intensity that made Shane's insides feel like they'd been arranged wrong.

Unable to handle the sudden twisting in his stomach, Shane pushed up

to his feet and went to rummage through their clothing pile. He heard Ilya splashing his way back to the dock as well. Shane pulled on his t-shirt, but ignored his jeans. He'd just get them wet anyway.

Ilya's necklace tumbled out of the mess of clothes and into the grass, and Shane picked it up. There was something tangled up near the clasp and Shane thought it was a chunk of grass at first, or maybe a bit of thread from a sweater, so he tugged it, trying to pull it off.

But there was an elastic give to it, and Shane realized it wasn't yarn or grass, but a hair tie. A familiar hair tie. It was twisted around and around into a spiral and looped through the clasp so it would stay to the back. Ilya had kept it, since their wedding.

"You kept this," Shane said, and turned to find Ilya beside him, watching carefully, giving nothing away.

"Yes."

"You wear it every day."

Ilya shrugged, an uncharacteristic defensiveness creating tension in his shoulders. "Is my wedding ring."

The hospital. When Ilya hadn't been able to find his wedding ring, he wasn't asking about the silicone one on his finger, but the elastic one he'd incorporated into his necklace. They'd taken his cross for the scans and put it in the bag with his clothes and phone. He'd wanted it back.

And Shane wanted to say, *I keep mine in my wallet,* and he wanted to say, *what does this mean,* and he wanted to say, *I think I've fallen in love with you,* but what came out was, "I don't want to get a divorce."

Ilya stilled, then turned, and stared at Shane for a long, silent moment. "Why not?" he finally asked.

Shane swallowed. There was something flickering in Ilya's expressive eyes, and it was enough like hope that Shane couldn't help but take the shot. "Because I want to be married to you." His voice was rough and barely louder than a whisper, but he knew Ilya could hear him. "And I know that—" Shane started, already backtracking, giving Ilya an out, but Ilya's hand came up and cupped his jaw and his thumb pressed over Shane's lips, silencing him.

Ilya took a step closer, until they were nearly chest-to-chest, and his

gaze flowed down from matching Shane's to focus on his mouth. "I want to be married to you too, Shane Hollander," he breathed, then he pressed forward, sliding his thumb away just in time to kiss Shane right there on the dock.

Something that Shane would later claim was a gasp of surprise instead of a sob of relief ripped out of his throat, and he launched himself into Ilya's arms. Ilya clutched him close, driving the kiss deeper, stumbling them backwards onto the grass in a way that was unusually clumsy for Ilya.

"Ilya, Ilya," Shane said between kisses, and Ilya moved from Shane's mouth to kiss over his cheekbone.

"What?"

"Can we just—Can we—"

"Shane." Ilya nibbled on the side of his neck, and Shane dug his fingers into Ilya's shoulders.

"Can we talk?" Shane shivered. "And maybe warm up."

Ilya smiled down at him. "Yes." He kissed Shane's forehead, just like he had so many times before, but this time Shane's stomach flopped in a different way. "Come on." Ilya grabbed his clothes, and Shane handed his chain back.

Inside, they both toweled off, then went to their own rooms to change into cozy sweatpants and long-sleeved shirts. Shane grabbed his wallet from his dresser and found Ilya again in the living room, his back to Shane. Shane watched as he re-clasped his chain around his neck, the hair tie disappearing behind his curls.

Shane cleared his throat, and Ilya turned. "Here." He handed over the wallet.

"Are you paying me for something?" Ilya asked with a laugh.

"Just open it."

Ilya gave Shane one of his piercing looks then opened the wallet and looked inside. It didn't take long for him to find the coil of Shane's hair tie ring tucked in the coin pouch. He took it out and rubbed his thumb over it.

"I keep it in there. I just—We don't—We both kept them."

Ilya reached for Shane's hand and drew him in close. "Why do you think that is so?"

"Because we're both sentimental idiots?" Shane offered. He grabbed two handfuls of Ilya's shirt on either side of his ribs and leaned forward until his forehead hit his chest. "Or maybe it's cause we have real feelings for each other?" Shane mumbled into Ilya's shirt. "Maybe?"

Ilya put a hand on either side of Shane's face and tipped his head back. "I think yes, maybe. At least, I know I am in love with you."

Shane felt his eyes going wide. "Really?"

"I know, it is a surprise because you are very boring and not as good as me at hockey, but yes. You are pretty to look at," Ilya said, grinning now, "responsible. Good husband."

A shaky laugh rattled out of Shane's chest as he remembered sitting on that gym floor with Ilya what felt like a hundred years ago, making this crazy plan. "You're a pretty okay husband, too." He dropped his hands to Ilya's hips and leaned in closer. "And I'm also in love with you."

"Good." Ilya kissed him. "Say it again."

"I love you."

Ilya let out a long, slow breath, his forehead pressed against Shane's. "I did not think—" He broke off, shaking his head a little.

"Well, it's kind of crazy, isn't it?" Shane brushed his lips along the sharp edge of Ilya's jaw.

"We managed to convince everyone else it was not so crazy."

"No, I'm pretty sure everyone else still thought it was crazy too." Shane snorted. "You're just a good actor."

Ilya wrapped his arm around Shane's waist. "I think, not that good, after all." He reached up and brushed his thumb over Shane's cheek then kissed the same place. He murmured something in Russian.

"What was that?"

"I said, *your freckles are so fucking cute,"* Ilya admitted, and Shane burst out laughing. He tipped backwards onto the couch and pulled Ilya down on top of him.

"We should have dinner with my parents. They're worried about us."

Ilya started kissing a path down Shane's neck. "I think we should not talk about your parents right now."

"Ilya…"

"Shane."

"Is that all you think about?"

Ilya shifted his hips so his leg slotted between Shane's, grinding down, and Shane's cock started to throb full. "Tell me you are not also thinking about this." Ilya's hand snuck down between them and he rubbed his palm over Shane's rapidly growing erection.

"Gnnh," Shane groaned. "Well, I am *now."*

"Let me show you how much I love you," Ilya purred, and Shane nearly came right there.

"Fuck. Oh my god." He squirmed under Ilya's weight.

Ilya pushed Shane's shirt up to kiss and nip his way down his stomach, while his other hand tugged Shane's sweatpants down. Shane did not regret not wearing anything underneath them, when Ilya was able to wrap his long fingers around Shane's cock immediately. Shane's hands snapped to Ilya's shoulders, and he just held on for a moment before skating them up to burrow in Ilya's curls.

"That feels so good." Shane rolled his hips up into Ilya's touch as he slowly stroked him to full hardness, Ilya's hot mouth exploring every dip of his abs.

"You know, I lied when I said you could do what I have shown you with someone else."

"Oh yeah?" Shane huffed out a sharp breath, arching his back to keep from thrusting wildly up against Ilya's chest. "You don't want me showing off what a good teacher you are?"

"No," Ilya growled.

"Okay. That's good, because I don't want to do this with anyone else."

Ilya's hand squeezed harder and moved faster, and Shane grabbed the shoulders of Ilya's shirt and tugged.

"Come here."

Ilya crawled back up, and Shane twisted them around so they were lying on their sides, face-to-face on the couch. He pulled on Ilya's pants, tugging them down and finding Ilya's cock with his hand. Shane kissed Ilya, swallowing his soft moan when Shane stroked him with a firm grip. It didn't take long for them to find matching rhythms, their thumbs brushing against each other as they jerked each other off.

The heat of Ilya's body pressing Shane into the back of the couch and the warm flush of pure joy at how they got here had Shane building towards the edge at top speed. He was here wrapped up with his husband, who he loved, who loved him back, sharing this pleasure in a way he never thought he would get to. The utter joy at the freedom of that was overwhelming. He never thought he'd get to have this, never thought he could have a loving, physical, happy relationship with a man, even in secret, let alone in front of everyone. But it was out there, and they'd dealt with all the bullshit together, and they'd stay together, after all this.

"Fuck, Ilya—I'm going to come."

"Yes," Ilya breathed. "Me too—"

And then to Shane's surprise, it was Ilya who did. He groaned and thrust forward into Shane's fist, and spilled over Shane's fingers, slicking the slide of his hand. The sight of Ilya falling to pieces and the mess on Shane's hand was enough to have him tumbling after only a few shaky strokes from Ilya later. Ilya found Shane's mouth, kissing him hard as they both eased down, finding their breath again.

"Wow," Shane breathed. "Why does everything you do feel so good?"

Ilya bumped their noses together. "I am just that good."

Shane laughed. He let his fingers tease Ilya's softening cock, grinning smugly. "Not as good as me, apparently."

"Is not a race." Ilya looked at his messy hand then shrugged and peeled his t-shirt off. He wiped his hand then let Shane do the same and tossed the shirt aside, lying back down after.

Shane snuggled himself closer to Ilya's chest. He traced the edge of Ilya's stupid tattoo with one finger. "So what are you going to do with the divorce papers?"

Ilya kept his eyes closed serenely. "I think I saw a fire pit while we were doing the filming, yes?"

"Really? Cause I know that if we were like, just starting to date or whatever, it'd be way too soon to be married, so I'd understand if you still want to get divorced."

Ilya's eyes opened at that. "I don't want the divorce. Maybe a few years from now, you get sick of me, want to break up, then we can talk to a lawyer again, but is silly to do it now if maybe someday we just want to get married a second time."

Shane smiled at that. It was deeply weird to go about this the wrong way around, but having Ilya as his boyfriend instead of his husband didn't feel right either. It was all wonky and back-to-front, but somehow still felt right for them. And knowing that Ilya believed this could be their forever made Shane's stomach feel warm and his heart flutter. "Okay." He kissed Ilya in the middle of his chest, over his heart. "Let's make popcorn and watch something stupid."

"Do you even know how to make popcorn?" Ilya chirped. "Kate had to make it for you yesterday. We do not want to have to call the fire department."

"Shut up." Shane rolled out off the couch and, reluctantly, off Ilya. "Pick something." He snagged the remote off the coffee table and tossed it towards Ilya who caught it one-handed.. "I'll have you know, I make excellent popcorn. I was just busy shooting the yoga thing that was *your idea,* so she *offered* to make it." He stalked off for the kitchen while Ilya chuckled behind him.

Shane was digging around in the cupboard for a bag of kernels when his phone rang, and he grabbed it off the counter and shoved it between his shoulder and his cheek. "Shane Hollander."

"Shane!" It was Farah. "I'm glad I caught you. How did the filming go?"

"It was great." Shane looked up to find Ilya peering curiously at him over the back of the couch. "I think they got some good stuff."

"Good. I'm so glad. Look, I don't want to interrupt your couple time up there, so I'll cut right to it. I have some news."

Shane swallowed hard. He'd stopped stock still in the middle of the kitchen, staring down at the tile. He tried to ask but his throat was tight. What if Montreal was dumping him and no one wanted him? What if he was being traded to the other side of the country, right when he and Ilya had finally worked things out? "Okay?" he managed.

“Shane. We got the trade.” He could hear the smile in her voice. “We got Ottawa. Get ready for your happy ending.”

And when Shane looked up, Ilya was standing there, watching him with concern. He hooked one arm around Shane's waist like he'd done so many times before and drew him in. *You okay?* he mouthed, and Shane broke into a brilliant grin. It hadn't really been too easy, had it? It had been fucking hard. And sometimes amazing, and sometimes awful, and they'd both poured so much into getting what they'd always wanted, and not all of it was hockey.

A huge, scary, magnificent chunk of what he'd always wanted was standing in his kitchen, with Shane in his arms, loving him, like he hadn't known it was possible to be loved.

"Yeah," he said into the phone, smiling at Ilya and nodding. "Yeah, I think you're right. I'm ready for a happy ending. I can't wait."

Chapter End Notes

Next up: the epilogue!

Thank you to Layne_162 for allowing us to headcanon her lovely story "Love and Chicken Parmesan"about David teaching Ilya to make chicken parm

Chapter 16: The Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"This is silly," Shane said, crossing his arms over his chest.

"No," Ilya insisted. "Is good. Harris wants us to do this. It will be so cute."

"Wouldn't they rather make an official announcement? Isn't it kinda… casual? To do it this way?"

Ilya stopped dragging Shane down the hallway of his Ottawa apartment—now *their* Ottawa apartment—and turned to look at him. "First thing you need to learn is that the Cens actually have fun sometimes. Second is that Harris is very good at his job and this was his idea. Third is that is good for me to remind everyone who you belong to because you look fucking adorable in that jersey and I do not share."

"Ilya," Shane whined, trying and failing to cover up the way Ilya's possessive words shot straight south.

"Come here." Ilya maneuvered Shane onto the balcony and lined him up so the light was just right. "There. Is better." He grabbed Shane's phone from him and turned it to selfie mode, then held it up in front of them, framing the picture.

When he clicked the shutter, it captured them both from the mid-chest up, in matching Centaurs jerseys, smiling at the camera with their heads tilted together.

"Perfect," Ilya said. "Post it. We are so fucking cute."

"I'm cute," Shane insisted. "You just keep bothering people until they give in and like you."

Ilya kissed the end of his nose and pushed his phone back in his hand. "Worked on you, so I am happy."

Shane made vague grumbling noises, following Ilya back inside with his peripheral vision while on his phone he brought up his social media feed. He typed and re-typed the post several times then sent it

before Ilya could back-seat write.

Well, the cat has come out of the backpack! I'm a Centaur now. Only thing we'll love more than beating each other is winning the Cup together. I'm so excited to be back home. Thanks for your support, Ottawa! 💙🌈

Shane looked at the photo while he waited for the post to appear, thinking about how a year ago this kind of public display made him want to crawl into a hole and disappear. He still wasn't really the type for a lot of PDA, and he frequently still blushed down to his toes when Ilya drew him into his lap at team barbeques, but it was just awkward now, instead of painful.

At the time, he hadn't realized how much of the pain had been the bone-deep surety that he'd never get to have it for real—at first, just with a man in general, and then, with the man he really wanted. The one who was currently leaning against their kitchen counter downing a glass of water, and was all his. Even though it was still embarrassing to post his personal life on the internet, Shane adored pictures like this one now. It was real; they'd made it.

Ilya's phone chimed and he pulled it out, read the post, then laughed. "You know, I know now that is not the right phrase."

"Are you kidding?" Shane tipped forward into his arms. "Of course it's the right phrase. Just google it. People use it all the time."

Ilya replied in Russian, and Shane scrunched up his nose, trying to translate.

"You…love…a…lightbulb?"

"I love a bad liar," Ilya corrected. He kissed Shane and when he pulled back his eyes were dark. "I think you should put the phone away."

"Oh, yeah? Why?"

"Because that jersey looks too good on you."

"Ilya, we have a team meeting in two hours."

"Plenty of time. Take off your pants."

"Wow, almost three years of marriage and all the romance is already gone. Where's my seduction, Rozanov?"

"What would be romantic would be if this said my name on the back."

He plucked at Shane's jersey, then started backing him towards their bedroom.

"No, that would just be confusing. Also if anyone took anyone else's name, you should take mine."

"Hmm," Ilya hummed, pressing soft kisses behind Shane's ear, "you are trying to make me as boring as you. First I take your name, then I am driving your awful car, and then suddenly half my shots go off the post, and I have to say sorry to the puck every time."

"You know what I hear in that? I hear, *Shane, I'm terrified I'm not going to be the high scorer on the team this year."*

"Do you know what you should hear?" Ilya stopped at the foot of their bed.

"What?"

Ilya leaned in and pressed his lips to Shane's ear. *"Take off your fucking pants."*

Shane barked out a laugh. "Okay, but if we're late, you're explaining it to Coach." He dropped his jeans, while Ilya stripped out of his jersey, then his hands went to the hem of his own, ready to peel it over his head, but Ilya stopped him.

"No. Wear that."

"You want to fuck me in my Cens jersey?"

"Yes. I used to imagine fucking you in *my* Cens jersey, after the All Stars game, but this is even better."

Shane sat down on the end of the bed and watched Ilya get the rest of the way naked. "You thought about me like that, back then?"

"Are you kidding?" Now naked, Ilya crawled over Shane, forcing him to scramble back towards the headboard. "I thought about you like that all the time. Even before. But after, even more. I had long list of what we could do. You are very distracting."

"Oh, yeah? What else was on that list?"

Ilya hummed thoughtfully, then grabbed Shane's hips and flipped him on his front. Shane yelped in protest, like they didn't both know how much he got off on Ilya manhandling him. "So many things," Ilya said,

voice rough as he hauled Shane's ass into the air and Shane let him, "but I know what is top of list for you." And then he spread Shane's cheeks with his big hands and licked a stripe over his hole.

"Holy *shit* — " Shane's nerve endings tingled from sensation and he writhed under Ilya's lips, half pushing back for more, half looking for something to do with himself other than beg. Because Ilya was right. This was the top of his fucking list. Ilya usually liked to take his time with him, though, working his tongue in until Shane was rutting against the sheets and forgetting how to form words. "This isn't–" Shane panted, "this isn't quickie behavior, asshole."

Ilya just paused to laugh and pat Shane's ass a little condescendingly. Shane would do…something about that. Later. "Be still," Ilya said, and Shane settled for burying his face in the pillow and bracing both hands against the headboard. His toes curled as Ilya rimmed his ass with the same enthusiasm that he sucked his cock. "Oh, god."

Ilya bit at the meat of Shane's ass making him jerk away with a yelp. "Ilya. For fuck's sake."

"Are you going to come on my tongue, sweetheart?"

"Not if you keep wasting time talking," Shane breathed.

"Maybe I want to take my time."

"We don't *have* time. We have a meeting, *fuck."*

"You would be late to get more of my mouth."

Shane huffed. *"Fucker.* No, I would not." Yes, he would. "You're not as good as you think you are." Yes, he was, and he wordlessly set about reminding Shane of all the reasons he'd never been able to resist Ilya Rozanov's smart mouth, sucking and licking until Shane moaned, shoving his hips back into Ilya's grip. "Ugh, I hate you." He was so hard, he could feel every throb of his heart in his dick, ramped up by every swipe of Ilya's tongue.

Then Ilya pushed inside, stretching Shane's rim around the firm muscle, and started fucking him with his tongue, using his hold on Shane's hips to rock him forward and back. Sounds that Shane had never heard come out of his throat before were filling the room. "God, that feels so good."

Ilya dropped one hand from Shane's hip and slid it between his legs.

He took Shane's balls in his hand and squeezed them lightly, stroking his thumb firmly up behind them, working Shane's prostate from the outside. But he refused to touch Shane's cock. There was something about doing this fast, about Ilya knowing exactly what drove Shane's body wild and taking him apart so *personally* that was kind of taking Shane to a place he hadn't visited before.

Shane was all but humping the air now, driving back on Ilya's tongue and pushing forward into his hand, barely finding the friction he needed. "Ilya," he whined. "Please."

But Ilya just kept working him, not moving any faster but keeping up a steady rhythm that had Shane writhing and begging right up to the edge. Just when he thought he might cry from frustration, Ilya's hand gripped the base of his cock, stroked up once, and Shane exploded.

"Oh, *fuck."* Shane squeezed his eyes closed and squeezed the pillow hard enough he might have torn it as he shot come all over the sheets under him. Ilya kept working him until Shane collapsed flat on the bed with a whine of oversensitivity. "Stop, stop. Oh, god. Fuck."

Ilya pulled back, already laughing, then pressed a kiss to Shane's lower back. "You should get a tattoo here that says 'Property of Ilya Rozanov.'"

"I love you, but I'm not getting a tramp stamp for you."

Ilya kissed him again, then crawled over Shane and pressed down on top of him. Shane could feel his hard cock press against his ass. It was Ilya's turn. Fuck, Shane wanted him, spent as he was. His cock twitched half-heartedly.

"I love when you look all fucked out because of me." Ilya pushed his cock between Shane's ass cheeks, sliding over Shane's spit-slick hole.

Shane shuddered, still on the edge of overstimulation, as Ilya humped him.

Ilya gripped a handful of Shane's jersey and his pace increased. "I'm so close already. It was so hot watching you come apart in this."

"Yeah, Ilya. Come on."

"I love seeing you in the same colors as me," Ilya panted. His breath came hot and hard against the back of Shane's neck, and then he bit down hard as Shane felt him release on his lower back, dripping down

his ass and over his fucked-out hole before he pulled back and finished over Shane's jersey. "Fuck, that looks good," Ilya panted while Shane just moaned in a kind of lust-blown shock. "God, I love you."

"I love you, too," Shane sighed, letting out all the tension in his body, the steady roll of aftershocks shivering up and down his spine. Ilya tipped off him and Shane crawled out of the wet spot. "Ew."

"Mmm. You look good all dirty." Ilya leaned back against the headboard, arms behind his head, watching Shane drip his come. He reached out and rubbed at Shane's hole, pushing his come inside with a thick, gentle thumb. Something that would last beyond the moment Shane took off his wrecked jersey.

"Well, it's a good thing I have more than one of these, because this absolutely needs a trip through the laundry." Shane plucked at his jersey, and enjoyed how Ilya's eyes tracked him while he stripped out of it and rose to go to the bathroom. "We should get dressed and go. We'll be late."

Ilya hummed in agreement, but he reached out and tried to tugShane back down on the bed. "We have a few minutes. The arena is not far." Shane rolled his eyes affectionately, then disappeared into the en suite to wipe down. When he returned, Ilya was in the same spot, flicking through his phone intently.

"What are you looking at?"

Ilya patted his chest. "Come see."

Shane pushed up and leaned against him, looking down at his phone screen. Ilya was scrolling through the replies to their post about the Cens, which he'd clearly shared almost immediately. There were a lot of likes and replies and reposts already, but Shane let Ilya scroll through them, only reading the ones where Ilya paused and turned the phone towards him.

This is the best news I've gotten all month. My two favourite players are on the same team!!

Place your bets on the first time they forget they're on the same side and try to trip each other 👄

You two are such an inspiration. All of Ottawa is rooting for you! #thecatisoutofthebackpack #GOCENS

Playing for the same team in every way. Get it? Get it? I'll see myself out #hollanov #GOCENS

New firsts ahead: first married couple in the penalty box at the same time for the same team? First married couple to win the Stanley Cup together?

Welcome home to Ottawa @shanehollanderhockeyplayer the prodigal son returns!

Oh god am I a Centaurs fan now?

Hottest team in the NHL, yes I said it. If they put Hollander and Rozanov on the Power Play with Barrett I will perish.

Long distance relationships are so hard. Really happy for you @therealilyarozanov and @shanehollanderhockeyplayer and can't wait to see what you do playing together. What a happy ending!

Chapter End Notes

We've reached the end! We can't believe it! Feeling emotional. This project was an outpouring of joy to create and we hope that it has brought you joy to read. Thank you so much for your lovely comments and encouragement along the way, and we wish you a peaceful New Year.

End Notes

With tremendous gratitude to betas and cheers yammz and JediStormbringer! <3

Check us out on tumbly! Sheets and Ferret

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!